**Enduring**

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/19911763.

| | |
|---|---|
| Rating: | Explicit |
| Archive Warning: | Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings |
| Category: | M/M |
| Fandom: | Hannibal (TV) |
| Relationship: | Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter |
| Characters: | Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter |
| Additional Tags: | Anal Sex, Anal Fingering, First Time, Extremely Dubious Consent, Multiple Orgasms, Overstimulation, Forced Orgasm, Bondage, Hannibal Lecter Loves Will Graham, Praise Kink, Blow Jobs, Prostate Milking, Hannibal just wants to make Will feel good, Will is thoroughly embarassed the entire time, Possessive Hannibal, Daddy Kink, but not really, Hannibal just loves calling Will boy, and Will might like it too, Rape/Non-con Elements, Voyeurism, Forced Exhibitionism, Spanking, Kidnapping, Stockholm Syndrome, but like, Will burning Stockholm down, cos he has no time for that shit |
| Language: | English |
| Stats: | Published: 2019-07-23 Updated: 2020-03-24 Words: 111,156 Chapters: 8/? |

# Enduring

by Late_Winter

Summary

Hannibal asks Will to leave with him that night. Will says no. But Hannibal cannot bear to see him go, to see him walk out of his - of their - home. So, Hannibal drops every pretense, stalks forward, and doesn't let him.

Notes

I've said it in the tags, but just as an extra disclaimer: in this story, Hannibal explores Will's body just like he explored his mind, which is to say thoroughly and without his explicit consent. So, beware, this is veeeery dubious consent, people! But as we all know, their entire relationship has always been dubious to begin with. It's honestly the mantra of our fandom.

Still, I promise there's nothing violent or rough about it. Hannibal is sickly sweet throughout the entire thing, and Will does enjoy it, though knowing Hannibal's true nature makes it very difficult to accept his own pleasure.

# Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will saw it.

The moment Hannibal broke. The moment the mask slipped; he didn't remove it, no, it came of its own volition, and he was incapable of clinging to it. The moment pretense was gone, patience waived, control abandoned.

The moment Hannibal showed himself, in its absolute, world engolfing nature.

It scorched the air and prickled ice in Will's skin. It magnified the room - it was the entire universe - and made Will's throat constrict. It opened, finally, the possibility for resolution, true, sincere and climactic.

Will felt paralyzed.

It happened when he was reaching for his coat. So close to leaving. So confident that Hannibal did not know of his betrayal; that, while they had dined roasted lamb and spoken of Jack's impending downfall, Hannibal hadn't suspected a thing.

So close to discarding the hint of despair he had detected, shy and vulnerable, when Hannibal had asked him to leave with him that same night.

And then he heard footsteps, and turned to find Hannibal looming at the entrance, posture tense, eyes sparkling with intensity.

'Will,' he said, voice low, rough, and it was because of it, of the edge that signaled his loss of restraint, that Will understood he wouldn't leave that house alive.

He'd die there, the most gorgeous work of art under Hannibal's design, the only one riddled with sincere sentiment.

He could see himself, his own limp body, and in it would be written more love and hate than any other art piece in the world.

How poetic, to lose the night before he was supposed to triumph.

'I'd like to show you something, before you leave.'

Will frowned, one hand still clinging to his coat, relunctant to leave it.

'What is it?'

'A memory from my childhood in Lithuania,' the lie slipped smoothly from his tongue, consonants curled in his soft accent, 'As our life begins anew, I find myself nostalgic of past

years.'

'When we reemerge, we'll have all the time in the world. Can't this wait?' it felt, to Will, like he was begging for his life.

Hannibal's lips quirked into a sad little smile.

'I doubt it can. Follow me, if you would.'

Will sighed. He carded his fingers through the heavy fabric of his coat one last time and then let go of it; there was a tone of morbid finality to it. Then, he pulled off a fake smile, guessing it'd simply be easier to mantain their charade for as long as possible, and started down the house with Hannibal.

The man led him upstairs, and passed the door to his office, which Will thought strange: where exactly would Hannibal dispose of him?

They walked in tense silence, the expectant middle between two deceitful ends, until he finally guided Will into an ample and luxuriously decorated room dressed in rich tones of burnt oranges and yellows, browns and golds.

Hannibal's bedroom, it seemed.

'So, where's this thing?' Will asked bitterly, disliking the fact that he had to feign ignorance, feign trust, when he had already predicted what happened next.

Hannibal would use his strength, his pretentious techniques, and dominate him; then, they'd talk, long insufferable metaphors ensuing, and blood coloured eyes would worship him as he died.

And so it happened.

As soon as Will finished speaking, a firm hand gripped his throat, and he was thrown against the door.

His back hit the harsh surface with a dull sound. In front of him, Hannibal stood in his divine poise, not one muscle twitching.

As fingers squeezed tighter around his neck, pressing, killing, Will devoted his entire focus to the other man's eyes.

They were uninterested. Besides the instinctive delight Hannibal withdrew from violence, there was nothing but restlessness there.

This was but an insignificant element of Hannibal's plan.

He didn't know if he was relieved: whether he wished for a magnificent death over a relatively painless one.

When his eyes were tearing up, his cheeks numb, his vision narrowing, Hannibal's hand pushed, leading him by the neck toward the plush king size bed. He threw him unceremoniously on it, then straddled his hips, towering above him, and finally loosened his grip.

Air rushed into Will's lungs, hiding there, frightened; he panted, wishing his eyesight to sharpen again, his senses to perk up. It was no use - by the time he regained control again, Hannibal had already tied his left hand to one of the bedposts, and was working efficiently on his right one.

'Fuck,' Will gasped out, pulling against the restraints - two of Hannibal's ties.

Hannibal looked at him then, expression unreadable. His grey suit was still immaculate, even as he straddled him.

Will had never felt so small - so inconsequential - in his entire life.

On the other hand, trapped under a self-proclaimed God, Will had never felt as *seen* before either.

And then Hannibal left the room. His shoes were silent against the floorboards, his demeanour seemingly unperturbed, as if he hadn't just tied a man up in his own bed.

Will took the time to test the knots encircling his wrists; they looped firmly, entwined in each other, and bit wickedly into his skin. There was nothing he could grab, nothing he could use, no way to free himself.

He had just attested that, even with his legs spread to the edge of his flexibility, he could only reach the borders of the bed, which was hopelessly useless, when Hannibal walked back in. Will quickly closed his legs again, but not before noting the sudden darkening in Hannibal's eyes, the flare of his nostrils.

His mask was most certainly off.

'Hannibal,' he said, a dissuading tone in his voice.

'Will,' Hannibal approached the bed, and Will could see he held a pair of scissors in his hand.

The object didn't bode well for Will in any possible situation.

Hannibal carefully placed the scissors besides Will's body. He slowly nudged Will's legs apart again, moving to kneel between them. Will let him do it without struggling, assuming that any attempt to run would only tug at Hannibal's love for chasing. Even when the man didn't retract his hands from Will's legs, preferring instead to keep them, warm and firm, on his thighs, Will allowed it. He guessed Hannibal enjoyed this sign of submission, and he was unwilling to degrade himself even further by attempting to resist it.

Instead, he wondered if the scissors would perforate his throat or his chest; if Hannibal would use it to cut his skin and expose his insides.

'I've realized this is the first time you've been in my bedroom,' Hannibal said, tone light, hands still wandering softly across Will's inner thighs. Will fought against the urge to squirm away from the intimate, persistent touch.

'It's nice,' Will complimented, shocked at the triviality of the subject, seeing as he was tied up.

'I do wish you could have been able to see it in better circumstances,' Hannibal lamented with a sigh.

Will nodded. It really was a nice bedroom; the earthly shades were elegant but calm, discreet, conciliating Hannibal's love for luxury and the appropriate mood for a bedroom. There was a stunning antique closet made of dark wood, undoubtedly housing a myriad of suits; a full length mirror in a wooden frame with golden finishing; a few paintings and statues to add some strokes of colour. If there had been a pair of armchairs, Will could have pictured Hannibal and he engaging in all kinds of conversations in that room.

'Yes, well, believe me when I tell you I wish that Lithuanian memento was real after all,' Will drawled, eliciting a soft chuckle from Hannibal.

'My dear Will,' he said with an adoring smile, lifting one hand to caress Will's cheek, 'You were going to betray me, weren't you?'

'Yes,' Will breathed out. There was no point in lying. Besides, it was difficult to elaborate a longer answer, not when Hannibal's expression was open with unprecedented emotion, when his touch seemed so gentle, so loving, against Will's skin.

'Because of what I am?' Hannibal quirked his head to the side, curious.

'No,' Will shook his head, 'because of what you did to me.'

Hannibal exhaled, eyes wide, seeming completely enraptured by Will's answer.

'You beautiful, remarkable boy...' he whispered. Then, to Will's immense shock, he leaned down and placed his lips atop his.

Will's mind took a moment to register that Hannibal was kissing him, that his hand was cupping his jaw, willing it to soften and open for him, while the other one went from his thigh to his hip, kneading it tenderly. Hannibal's lips moved smoothly on his, sucking on his bottom lip, prodding it with his tongue.

There was no pain, no blood. Will was being kissed with an intensity and passion which felt entirely sincere.

When he finally registered it, Will quickly turned his face so that his lips were out of reach. Hannibal, seemingly unperturbed, pressed his lips onto the pale skin of Will's cheek instead.

'Hannibal, what the hell are you doing?'

'Isn't it obvious?' Hannibal retorted, amused, as he kept pressing featherlight kisses to Will's cheek and jaw.

'Enlighten me,' Will answered wryly. Suddenly aware that his legs were still invitingly spread, he attempted to close them as much as he could; when his knees hit Hannibal's solid form, and he realized that he couldn't close them anymore - that Hannibal had made a place for himself between them - a flush burnt hot in his features. The extra contact seemed to only spur Hannibal on; the man groaned deep in his throat and latched his lips more forcefully on Will's skin.

'I'm kissing you, Will,' Hannibal explained condescendingly, 'Something I've wanted to do since the moment I met you.'

'Well,' Will sputtered, still squirming, 'Stop.'

Hannibal chuckled, and moved down to nibble and kiss the red imprints of his fingers on Will's neck in wordless apology.

'Weren't you the one to seduce me, dear Will, to entice me so completely?' Hannibal punctuated his point with a playful bite to his Adam's apple, 'You rip what you sow.'

'I was thinking more of a 'seducing of the mind' thing, however. I didn't think sex would ever appeal to you.'

'Normally, it doesn't, but it mustn't surprise you that I wish to have you in every way,' the smile Hannibal showed him was disturbingly fiendish.

Will was thinking of what to answer, what miraculous string of words would disarm this situation, when Hannibal's hand, the one that had been on his hip, explored upward, ghosting by a strip of skin that his shirt and undershirt, having ridden up, had left exposed.

Will, surprised by the contact of skin, gasped out, and though he muffled it out almost instantly, Hannibal, ever observing, noticed it with a smug smile, his hands returning to the spot which had elicited that reaction.

'Does that feel pleasant, sweetheart?' Hannibal inquired, his fingers prodding gently beneath the layers of clothing.

Will clenched his jaw, trying not to let out any sound. Hannibal's tone had been mostly amused, teasing, but there was genuine need in it too; though Hannibal was, superficially, in a dominant position, he had probably never felt so exposed in his life, and he was desperately searching for signs that Will was affected as well.

Will, not knowing how else to rebel, was at least withholding him this satisfaction.

It wasn't, as it turned out, the greatest plan, since it only led Hannibal to step up his own game.

'Well, I guess we'll have to find more pleasurable places, then' he said with a mischievous smirk as he unearthed the long forgotten pair of scissors, 'I do hope you don't particularly like

this shirt.'

Will immediately tensed, wrists straining against the restraints. He tried to lift his head up so as to not feel so overpowered, and to close his legs again, which only resulted in pressing Hannibal's sides and making him feel even more defenseless.

'Hannibal, no, fuck, stop it,' Will urged, begining to panic - he had stopped himself from thinking of what would come after the kisses and the teasing, but now the inevitability of the situation was starting to scare him.

Hannibal didn't answer, working on his shirt and undershirt efficiently, cutting all along the sleeves so they'd fall from Will's arms. Soon, Will was shirtless beneath Hannibal, who was looking at him with blown pupils, a predatory's gaze.

'Is it here you want me, Will?' he asked, licking a hot stripe across the same spot he'd prodded before.

Will shivered involuntarily, and Hannibal smiled, kissing and nibbling up Will's stomach unforgivingly. When he reached Will's nipples, he sealed his lips around each one and sucked, with intermittent bites that always made Will squirm, until they were rosy peaks, puffed and abused.

Hannibal blew on one, the burst of cold air teasing on the sensitive skin, and Will, without meaning to, without even registering it, moaned.

Hannibal grinned.

'What was that, sweetheart?' he asked, voice entirely sugar, and it didn't even seem fake; there was such wonder there, such joy, and when he blew on Will's other nipple and Will, mortified, moaned again, such pride, that he seemed genuinely adoring, genuinely fascinated of every positive response he coerced from Will.

'Hannibal, please just stop, or slow down or something. Let's just talk this through first,' Will tried to reason, though he felt way too embarrassed and helpless to think clearly.

'There is no logical reason for us to stop. I'm enjoying it, and you're enjoying it too, aren't you?' Hannibal asked with a smirk, before boldly cupping Will's unwilling erection.

'Fuck!' Will tried to get away from that hand, but his range of movement was too limited and he couldn't shake it off; it stayed there, not moving, yet firm and possessive all the same, 'No, God, Hannibal, I can't control it! Fuck, I'm not even attracted to men!'

Hannibal huffed, 'Perhaps not *men*, but you do feel attracted to me, don't you, Will? Just me, body and mind' Hannibal stated, eyes authoritarian, as if he was forbidding Will from being attracted to anyone else. Will figured that Hannibal, incapable of developing any other sincere emotional and sexual connection with anyone besides Will, would be desperate for the same type of devotion.

Hannibal started moving his hand again, working Will's erection with a firm, teasing pressure, as if to prove his point. Will felt horribly betrayed by his own body, and incredibly confused as well - the truth was Hannibal's mind appealed to him like no one else's, and he seemed capable of arousing him as well, something Will had never considered. Together, every sensation blurred, and Will could barely think, and every little moan he was helpless to suppress only fueled Hannibal's need.

When Hannibal popped the button of Will's jeans, however, his mind was overruled by a very clear, white strike of anger.

'Don't you fucking dare,' he hissed, legs thrashing so that Hannibal couldn't get a proper grip on his jeans.

'Do you plan on being like that the entire time?' Hannibal inquired, features showing nothing but fond exasperation.

'I do, if you keep trying to go down that path,' Will warned.

Hannibal chuckled, moving up Will's body to place light kisses upon his frown, before pressing his lips to his ear and saying, 'If you keep struggling, I'll have to tie your legs up as well. I'd suggest you stay compliant until I fully divest you; if you manage that, my dear, I'll leave your legs free.'

Will groaned, so frustrated that he was completely *helpless*, 'You're asking me to let you undress me.'

'I am' Hannibal agreed, seeming entirely too satisfied with the situation.

After a moment of careful consideration - not that Hannibal stopped his ministrations: he sucked a symmetry of bruises on his collarbones - Will relented, 'Fine, just do it.'

Hannibal nodded and sat back up to take care of removing Will's jeans. Firstly, he took off his shoes and socks; then, he unzipped him, and grabbed the hem of his jeans and boxers.

'Hips up, love.'

Will closed his eyes, trying to wish himself away, to take shelter in his mind, and did as requested. With one swift movement, his jeans and underwear were off, discarded, and he was completely naked, lithe body squirming underneath Hannibal's fully dressed form.

'Good boy,' Hannibal praised with a smile, taking a moment to observe with hungry worshipping eyes the entirety of Will's body.

With that compliment, Will couldn't help but flush, chest and cheeks embarassingly hot; he felt so exposed, so small, and he hated it.

Hannibal, of course, noticed, and seemed to delight in his reaction. Immediately, he attached himself to Will's neck, nibbling his pulse point, clearly intending to drive Will mad with this new discovery:

'You *are* a good boy, Will. *My* good boy, and only mine. My beautiful, brilliant, clever boy, who looks so lovely when he blushes, so pretty and pink.'

'Fuck, Hannibal, stop saying those things,' Will demanded, feeling belittled and humiliated.

'You like it,' Hannibal accused, his hand returning down to grip Will's cock, which had gotten harder. He gathered the precum gathering at the tip and rolled it around the head of his dick teasingly, eliciting a shiver from Will, 'You may have never found it appealing before, but with me, and only me, it comes naturally.'

'Stop fucking *psychoanalyzing* me!' Will groaned, trying to keep his voice steady even as his dick was repeatedly tugged.

'You are completely at my mercy, Will; you are tied and I can do with you as I wish,' Hannibal stated matter-of-factly, caressing Will's cock from root to tip. The vision of Hannibal's hand, this instrument of death,  with strong slender fingers wrapping tightly round his erection, was too overwhelming for Will.

In the end, what did he expect? Hannibal had already violated him in so many other ways, this was but the most natural progression.

'You said before, you cannot control your body, so why not surrender to it?' Hannibal continued, voice rough, alluring, 'Why not submit to your most ardent wishes?' he pressed hot kisses down his sternum, hovering above him, perfectly composed in his grey suit, save for the weight of his breath, the edge in his stare, 'I'll take care of you, my love. I'll set the limits within which you can implode, as I've always done.'

'You want private access to my destruction,' Will groaned out, all effort devoted to keeping his head leveled, to keeping his climax at bay.

'To your becoming,' Hannibal corrected, and when he cupped Will's balls, rolling them in his palm, and Will moaned, he surged forward to drink in the little broken sound directly from his lips. He didn't linger for too long on Will's mouth to minimize the risk of Will biting him; he detached himself almost reluctantly, licking up his cheekbone and biting softly on his earlobe.

'Hannibal, you have to slow down,' Will cautioned, hands clenched to fists against the intricate knots. He wanted to slap Hannibal's hand away, to guide his lips away from his ears, his neck, his chest; he wanted to flail his legs but it seemed so *humiliating*, so *pointless* - he was completely exposed, and he could only imagine how helpless he must look in Hannibal's perspective: tied up and naked, entire body flush and tense beneath him, forced to keep still and endure his ministrations, and so weak he couldn't even stay quiet.

Hannibal only hummed, and tightened his grip, stroking relentlessly with an expert flick of the wrist on every downstroke, a brush of thumb over his slit to smear pearls of precum around the head. He hovered above him, his other hand on the mattress besides Will's body, and his lips danced hungrily across his skin, sucking vicious bruises and then soothing the abused spot with his tongue.

'Don't deprive yourself from pleasure, Will,' he said, voice stern, compelling; hand demanding on Will's red, weeping dick, 'I can feel you approaching the edge, ready to topple over.'

'Fuck, no, I won't,' Will tensed his jaw, trying to escape the tingling pleasure overwhelming every inch of his body, the voice that begged, over his ragged breaths, to be allowed release.

'You will,' Hannibal insisted, seeming so sure of himself, every tug of his wrist doing terrible and wonderful things to Will.

'Hannibal, stop, alright? Don't make me, fuck!, don't force me to do this,' Will said, feeling his orgasm lurking under his skin, stretching it hot and thin.

Hannibal moved so his face was just above Will's, so he could perfectly see every twitch of muscle: the trembling of his lips, the set angle of his jaw, the rippling twitches hidden under the subtle stubble of his cheeks. Will couldn't escape his intense stare, but he still tried, turning his head to look away.

'Come for me, Will' Hannibal ordered with one sweet, scorching kiss to his cheek. And Will, helpless, utterly humiliated, came, spilling onto Hannibal's strong hand.

He closed his eyes, shut them firmly until it hurt, and let himself buck a few times into Hannibal's fist, thoughtless and uninhibited in the aftermath of his orgasm. Then he stopped, unwilling to allow himself any more pleasure; it was fruitless, however, as Hannibal's hand followed him skillfully, stroking him persistently and riding out the climax.

'Such a good boy, Will, so beautiful like this, mindless in your own pleasure,' Hannibal layed hot, open-mouthed kisses across his jawline and slack lips, voice absolutely wrecked, clearly aroused as well.

Will panted, trying to recover his speech, his vision, his head.

'My perfect boy. Say it, sweetheart, tell me who you are.'

'I- what?' Will blinked, trying to comprehend the request whispered rough and low into his ear.

'Who are you to me, Will? Say it,' Hannibal licked the shell of his ear, bit and sucked the lobe, his own heavy breaths buried in Will's soft curls.

'I'm not... I'm not saying that, Hannibal, are you crazy?' Will frowned and squirmed away from Hannibal's form, which was now mostly draped over his right side. The ties tugged mercilessly at his wrists and he bit off a groan.

Hannibal relented with one disappointed sigh, and sat back up between Will's forcefully spread legs. The orgasm had left Will so weak he didn't even have the strength to keep them as closed as possible, leaving them to hang limply and exposing himself even further to Hannibal.

The man seemed entirely transfixed by the sight for a moment, staring up at Will's face, chest, soft cock and the pink, virgin entrance between his legs with an expression of pure awe, divine delight. He had never seemed so content, nor so predatorial.

Then, to Will's continuing shock, Hannibal brought one of his hands, the one covered with Will's come, to his mouth and licked his fingers clean.

'You taste delicious, Will,' Hannibal praised, 'Would you like to try?' he added with a devious smirk.

'No, thanks,' Will huffed, rolling his eyes at the sheer absurdity of the situation.

Hannibal seemed to contemplate the response for a moment, his hand still raised in the air. He seemed to be pondering on whether he could convince Will otherwise, whether he could feed him his own release.

'If you try, I'll bite your finger off,' Will stated bluntly, wanting to show that the matter wasn't open for discussion.

Hannibal smiled with a resigned expression and dropped his hand, 'Perhaps another time, then.'

Then, he stood up from the bed, flattening the soft fabric of his suit and retrieving the discarded pair of scissors, no doubt to put it in its original place. Save for the red in his cheeks, the wide disk of black in his eyes and the tenting in his slacks, he looked perfectly composed. It only made Will even more aware of his own state, flushed and sweaty and breathless, in display for Hannibal.

'I shall return shortly,' Hannibal announced with another soft, loving smile, and left the room.

As soon as the other man left, Will deflated, every muscle relaxing into the mattress. He pressed his thighs firmly together to make up for the vulnerable position he'd been forced to take.

He didn't know how to feel.

Superficially, it was easy. Will felt like anyone else would feel. He was tired, both physically and emotionally; he felt frustrated, defenseless, embarrassed at his body's response.

Deep down, his mind was a storm of other thoughts.

The rational part of his brain, cold and critical, was *relieved*. After seeing Hannibal's fascination so apparent, he didn't think he'd die that night, though he was unsure as to what exactly Hannibal had in store for him. In any case, it wasn't death, and Will felt like he could endure this coercion.

And then, there was the part of him Hannibal had *seen* and nurtured.

This part was seething.

He felt defeated by Hannibal, unable to play their game fairly - how could he, when Hannibal had suddenly discarded every unwritten rule between them?

They had danced a dance of metaphors and pretense, behind masks and polite words. They touched fleetingly and mostly for practical reasons; Will had never even considered the physical aspect of their relationship.

So now, Hannibal dropping his mask and unfolding into the beast that lurked within, and changing their relationship so drastically seemed like a violation of their game, a complete redesign of them.

And the worst part was Hannibal truly wasn't pretending. Will could see the sincerity in his eye: there was the murderer, the cannibal, the psychopath, and this overwhelming, desperate *fondness* for Will.

Hannibal had said he'd wished to kiss him since they'd met, and he hadn't been lying, which probably meant he had been hiding this depth of feeling since then.

The thought that Hannibal had wanted to do this to him, *with* him, for that long shocked Will. He knew he had seduced Hannibal, made him see him as a partner, as an *equal*, but he hadn't considered romance.

Hannibal wouldn't kill him, but he wouldn't let him go, either. And, with no means of escape, all he could do was try to appease the man with words and expressions.

Will felt helplessly vulnerable and unsure of his fate.

His thoughts disbanded the moment Hannibal came back into the room, humming contently to himself.

It was incredibly frustrating, and Will groaned to show his displeasure. In response, the man smiled, seeming completely unfazed. The bulge in his slacks hadn't subsided in the least, which didn't please Will either.

Hannibal neared the bed, and Will realized he was holding a glass of water. He eyed it suspiciously.

'I thought you'd like some water before we continue,' Hannibal explained. When he was faced with nothing but distrustful silence, he took a significant sip from the glass, 'I have not poisoned it, I assure you.'

Will contemplated the glass for a moment, then nodded - he was pretty sure there was nothing wrong with the water, and he was indeed thirsty. He just didn't like accepting Hannibal's kindness.

Hannibal smiled approvingly and sat besides Will's body; the hand that didn't hold the glass came to rest at the back of Will's neck, playing idly with the soft brown curls there before pushing his head up, so he could drink properly. Being helped sip from the glass, while his own hands were hanging uselessly above him, was a whole new kind of demeaning.

'You're enjoying this,' Will accused.

'I am,' Hannibal agreed easily, with a self-satisfied smirk, 'Drink a bit more, love,' he said, tilting the glass so Will had no choice but to take the water in his mouth so it wouldn't spill.

'Why?'

Hannibal gracefully placed the glass of water on the bedside table before crossing his hands on his lap, features thoughtful.

'Having the object of my affection solely reliant on me appeals to my baser instincts. I enjoy taking care of you, Will' Hannibal explained, brushing up a curl of Will's hair that had fallen to his forehead, 'Besides,' he added, tone lowering, 'You do look so lovely like this.'

Will huffed, rolling his eyes - Hannibal got a kick out of seeing him frustrated and helpless beneath him.

Hannibal cleared his throat and stood up, clearly intending to continue whatever it was they were doing.

'Spread your legs for me, Will,' he asked, and it was evident that he found an obscene amount of satisfaction in saying those words.

Will looked down at himself: his thighs were still pressed together, his soft cock resting innocently between them. He didn't want to feel exposed again.

'Can we please just talk, Hannibal?'

'We can talk, yes,' Hannibal conceded, kneeling on the bed and placing his hands on Will's knees, fingers digging gently into the flesh.

'No, can we *just* talk?' Will struggled to keep his knees closed, despite Hannibal's hands trying to drive them apart, 'I mean, you got what you wanted, I'm humiliated and useless,' he strained against his restraints to illustrate his point, 'You've made me come, turned my own body against me. You win, Hannibal. So *stop*.'

Hannibal huffed, looking insulted, 'I assure you, Will, my goal was never to humiliate you, nor render you *useless*. You must see the power you possess still, in your mind, the hold you have over me,' Hannibal's thumbs drew soft circles on his skin, 'I strive only to give you pleasure, to show you all the benefits our partnership could offer. To show you why you should stay,' he admitted, and his eyes were sincere, hopeful.

Was this Hannibal's twisted way of convincing Will to stay with him?

'Now, spread your legs for me, Will,' Hannibal repeated, nudging his knees to the sides.

Will allowed them to be moved, not knowing what else to do. He turned his gaze to the ceiling so he wouldn't have to watch as Hannibal settled between his legs with a contented sigh, like he belonged there. And he definitely didn't look when Hannibal bent his legs at the knees, planting his feet against the mattress, exposing him even further.

'What happens if I don't change my mind before the night ends?' he asked, trying not to let the conversation die.

'Then more nights will come,' Hannibal answered simply, and then leaned down to press a kiss to Will's softened pink cock.

Will sucked in a deep breath, hands flexing in his restraints, and Hannibal smiled wickedly against his crotch. He pressed a row of teasing kisses against his inner thighs, nibbled viciously at the juncture between thigh and crotch until Will was gasping and squirming underneath him. Then, he devoted his attention back to Will's cock, still sensitive from his previous orgasm, and licked along the shaft with the flat of his tongue.

'Hannibal, what are you doing?' Will breathed out. His legs flinched more than once, trying to escape the overwhelming sensations, but Hannibal kept them mostly still by pressing his ankles firmly against the bed.

'There's still traces of your release here,' Hannibal mumbled, breath hot against Will's dick, before he suckled hotly at the head, tonguing the slit teasingly as if he was trying to reach the beads of come still inside him.

'Fuck, well, *leave them*!' Will demanded, feeling blood rushing down in a hot wave toward his crotch.

Hannibal shook his head, 'As I've said before, you taste exquisitely, dear Will.'

Will groaned in frustration and Hannibal continued licking and sucking in earnest. When he grazed Will's cock with a row of teeth, Will threw his head back and whimpered.

Hannibal *purred*.

'Oh, such beautiful noises you make, sweetheart,' he doted, 'Will you make it for me again?'

He gently grazed his teeth against the head of Will's dick, causing Will to whimper once more.

Hannibal's smile was all teeth.

'So beautiful, Will, so gorgeous for me,' Hannibal sucked half of Will's dick into his mouth, sealing his lips around it, and one of his hands went to play with Will's balls.

Will was overrun with a bout of breathless, surprised hysteria.

'Fuck, Hannibal, you do understand you're a cannibal, right?'

'I'm aware, yes,' Hannibal answered with a smirk after removing his lips from around Will's cock. He pressed a kiss to its tip, 'Does it scare you?'

Will thought for a moment.

'No.'

'Not my teeth, then' Hannibal let them close ever so lightly around Will's head so that if he were to apply any pressure, it'd be an excruciating bite, 'Does it scare you then that it was my teeth that made you erect once more?'

Will flushed. He had tried to avoid it, to wish it away, but the stimulation felt so good, the edge of Hannibal's teeth so *exhilarating,* that he was helpless in the end.

He stayed silent, wordless in his shame.

'You have a remarkable refractory period,' Hannibal went on, suddenly conversational; his voice was rougher now from sucking Will's cock. He looked damn satisfied too, excited to explore the possibilities his new discovery had opened.

'Well, I haven't done... *this* in a while,' Will tried to explain, even though Hannibal's warm hand cupping his balls and possessive lips marking his skin were so distracting, 'My body is probably just overcompensating.'

'I don't see why you wouldn't engage in sexual activities more often. I rather think you have the potential to quite enjoy it,' Hannibal said this smugly, deviously, 'Your empathy must significantly amplify the pleasure. Besides, I don't see you lacking in viable, willing partners,' this, in turn, was said with disdain.

'I guess-' Will cut himself off when Hannibal licked a long teasing stripe down his shaft, '- I found it more awkward than anything, in most cases.'

Hannibal hummed thoughtfully.

'I think it's been a matter of finding the right partner,' he answered, a smug, proprietary twinkle in his eye.

Will arched one eyebrow in a frown of pure skepticism, 'You mean you?'

At Will's reaction, Hannibal widened his eyes, looking at him from between Will's open legs with a mix of surprise and affront.

'Has your orgasm tonight not been the most intense you can remember?' he asked, voice husky and demanding.

Will laughed disbelievingly, 'Are you asking me if you're the best I've ever had?'

His wry comment seemed to sharpen Hannibal's features, darken his eyes; he moved his hand so his fingers encircled Will's erection in a tight grip, not stroking but holding, strong, firm and possessive.

'Intimately, I am the *only one* you've ever had, Will. Has anyone else seen you as vulnerable and open? You and your partners most likely had sex with the lights off, disconnected, detached. They tended to your physical needs, but not your emotional ones.'

'I don't need what you're giving me,' Will retorted, words cutting, 'I don't need to be called all those things you call me.'

'No, but you want it,' and now Hannibal's hand was moving, stroking hard and forceful, 'You like to see us, both beasts in nature, enraptured in such tenderness. You crave to see how much I love you.'

Will's face went slack with sudden shock. Hannibal loved him?

'Is that what you wanted, then?' he fumed, 'A grandiose love confession? Well, it's done now, so what's the next part of your plan? Will you *dispose* of me, Hannibal?'

Hannibal pursed his lips like the mere suggestion repulsed him, 'Of course not. We consume each other, Will - we live as one. To let you go or kill you would be suicidal.'

Will sagged, not knowing whether he should be relieved or upset at the man's words. He let his head drop to the side and closed his eyes, Hannibal patting the inside of his thighs reassuringly - silence overcame them, peaceful and, for a moment, eternal.

'Hannibal,' Will said softly.

'Yes, my dear?'

'Untie me. Let me get dressed, and we can talk about this in your office.'

Hannibal sighed. When he spoke, his voice was gentle but resolute:

'Not just yet, love.'

He crawled up Will's body, leaving sweet kisses on the bruises colouring his clavicles, tender and apologetic, as if he truly couldn't untie Will - as if that's simply how things had to be. Will seethed at this, but any scorching comment he had been brewing froze in his belly when Hannibal took hold of his neglected erection once more; it had subsided a little during their more peaceful moment, but now, with Hannibal's lazy, loose strokes, it was quickly filling up again.

'How many times do you believe you can orgasm in one night?' Hannibal inquired, tone light and innocently curious, though his eyes shone dark and seductive.

'Hannibal, for God's sake, just *stop*,' Will groaned, frustrated beyond belief.

'How many?' the man insisted, his grip on Will's dick stimulating but not tight enough to draw out Will's release.

'I don't know,' Will answered impatiently, 'Usually I only come once.'

Hannibal's features straightened in disapproval, though it didn't seem entirely directed at him.

'Oh Will, the time you have wasted with inattentive, *unworthy* partners, unable to take care of you like you deserve,' he ducked his head to plant adoring kisses along Will's tense stomach, 'Give me an estimate, then.'

Will clenched his teeth. There was no point in lying, saying he couldn't orgasm again - his raging erection was quite damning proof otherwise. So, he went with the smallest number he could, the one which would permit the night to end as fast as possible.

'Twice in one night. I can come for you once more,' he eventually responded, hoping the words would spur Hannibal on and make him finish this quickly.

As Will had predicted, Hannibal groaned deep in his throat at his answer, eyes impossible black for an instant. He nipped viciously along his pelvic bone, sharp teeth making Will squirm.

'Twice in one night,' Hannibal repeated with one particularly rough tug on Will's poor sensitive cock, 'We shall make that our goal to beat.'

And instead of picking up his pace, driving Will to the brink of orgasm again like Will expected, Hannibal swiftly left the bed, nearing his head and searching inside the drawers of his bedside table.

When he kneeled between Will's legs again, a fiendish smile on his lips and a small bottle in his hand, Will felt a crushing weight in his chest.

'Hannibal, no, *please*. '

'Shh, it's alright, sweetheart,' Hannibal said, soothing hands on Will's legs. Will felt the maddening urge to slap them away, and his wrists fought helplessly against the knots.

'Fuck, no,' Will scrambled to find the sequence of words the other man would actually listen to, 'I won't find pleasure like that, ok? I can't, I'm not into that kind of thing.'

Hannibal seemed unfazed by his pleas. He drew him an indulging smile, like Will was being unnecessarily difficult, throwing an insignificant and endearing fit.

'Have you tried it before?'

'No, I told you I don't like the idea of it,' Will said in the clearest tone he could summon, hoping Hannibal was actually open to readjusting his plans.

'Have you never experimented by yourself even? With your fingers or a slim object?' Hannibal's tone was superficially curious, but there was a taunting tilt to it, a hidden hunger.

'No, and I'd like to keep it that way, please.'

For a moment, it seemed as if Hannibal was truly listening to him, truly *considering* . But then, the undeniable flash of possessive glee overcame his features, and Will could see Hannibal hadn't been dissuaded by his words, he'd *loved* them - he was completely overjoyed with the idea that he'd be the first one - the *only one* - to touch Will there, to spread him open and break him, to be the only one Will could ever associate with that feeling.

'I rather think you'll enjoy being filled,' he said in a seductive, compelling tone, voice so low it was nearly inaudible, 'I'll make it so pleasurable for you, sweetheart, and you'll be a good

boy and take it for me.'

Hannibal seemed fueled by his own words, eyes so intense and hungry on Will's face. Will knew what he was picturing: him, writhing mindlessly, moaning on Hannibal's fingers, on his cock, helpless to do anything but endure it.

The thought inspired in him pure dread.

'Hannibal, *fuck*, I won't let you do this! Do whatever else you want, just not this!' he hated the note of despair in his voice, but he was terrified, and fear had silenced his pride; he tried to close his legs, forcing Hannibal to hold them tightly apart with both hands.

'What are you afraid of?' Hannibal asked, adopting the ever-reasonable facet he wore in his office, when he was prodding into Will's thoughts.

Will hated his composure.

'I just don't *want* it,' he repeated, ashamed of how much it seemed like a whine.

'Tell me why, sweetheart,' Hannibal couldn't fool Will - though a part of him, yes, was truly concerned, another got off on this, on making Will uncomfortable, forcing him to articulate his complaints like they were completely irrational, little and meaningless, and he wasn't in such helpless, frustrating circumstances.

He liked seeing Will flounder - knowing he was the one steering the current.

'I just *don't*! Why do I have to have a reason?' he was flushing, unbearably red, the heat pricking on his skin; he wanted to cover his face with his hand, but not even those small comforts were allowed.

'We'll go slowly,' Hannibal assured, 'I'll consult you on every detail, and I'll pause if it becomes too much. It won't hurt. You'll like it.'

Will's breath came out in ragged pants. He didn't answer.

'Relax your legs, my love. Let me see you.'

'I said no,' Will shook his head. His voice cracked.

'Alright,' Hannibal gracefully left the bed again, 'I shall tie them, then. You'll relax much better knowing you have no physical power left, no way to stop me - knowing all you can do is enjoy it.'

Will's soul went cold.

'Please no,' he'd never sounded so small.

Hannibal must have noticed his distress, even more bitter than before, because his eyes seemed to falter for the first time.

'It's for the best, my love. It'll feel better. You won't have to worry about a thing.'

'No, just please don't, I won't struggle anymore, I promise,' Will tried desperately. When that didn't stop Hannibal, who was moving toward his dresser in search of another tie, he screamed brokenly, 'I won't bite.'

Hannibal's back stilled. He turned around, surprise on his face.

'Pardon?'

He had heard him. He was in disbelief.

'Please,' Will whispered, voice soft once more. Hannibal would know he wasn't lying - he was too desperate for deceit.

Hannibal prowled back to the bed like a starved man and threw himself atop Will, framing his head with his forearms.

He kissed him. Gently, slowly. Lips moving tenderly, tongue prodding curiously.

And Will didn't bite.

He let Hannibal suck his upper lip, take his bottom one between his teeth and tug at it playfully. He didn't contain his moan in order to please Hannibal, and when the other man groaned and tried to chase the sound with his tongue, Will let him, opening his mouth for him.

Hannibal explored the inside of his mouth, taking his time. The kiss changed from soft to rough in a maddening limbo. When Will - who was decided to prove that he could in fact obey, and that he didn't have to get his legs tied - moved his tongue shyly against Hannibal's, his first active sign of reciprocation since the begining of the night, Hannibal nearly howled, a rough, intimidating sound that vibrated in his throat, and broke the kiss to breathe hotly against Will's reddened and abused mouth.

'So lovely, so beautiful, such a good boy for me,' Hannibal praised, overwhelmed with desire, with pure joy at having Will so receptive.

Will whimpered and Hannibal rushed to capture the sound.

'You'll drive me mad, my love,' he said, peppering feverish kisses on Will's lips, nose, cheeks, chin, 'Say it for me now, Will. You're my good boy, say it.'

'Fuck, I can't,' Will whispered, and it somehow sounded like he was *begging*.

'But you want to, don't you?' Hannibal's eyes were wild, searching Will's face desperately, 'Tell me, Will, let me hear it.'

Will shook his head. Then, because he couldn't say it, but he still wanted to please Hannibal, to assure his legs stayed free, and because deep down, for some reason, he genuinely felt *sorry*, he moved to press his lips softly against Hannibal's.

He swore he could feel Hannibal gasp.

Though the man took a second to process the offer, riddled by surprise, he eventually leaned hungrily into the kiss. He seemed to have forgotten his request, completely in awe of this new gift.

Will could only think that the tongue delving into his mouth had tasted the flesh of so many spirits before.

'You'll relax your legs for me, love? You'll stay still and let me take care of you?'

Swallowing his dignity, Will nodded.

Hannibal's smile was nothing short of euphoric.

With one last, drawn out kiss, Hannibal finally straightened back up. He spread Will's legs - which went willingly - until they were as far apart as possible and bent at the knees, so that his ankles were next to his hips. Then, he kneeled between them once more.

Will's cock was still half-hard, and Hannibal stroked it indulgently a few times, until it was fully erect.

He took the small bottle again, rolled it in his hands to warm it up, and coated his fingers with lubricant.

'Hannibal,' Will breathed out, reticent again. Though he had accepted that he couldn't escape, he was still terribly afraid.

'I'll go very slowly,' Hannibal promised once more.

When his fingers circled Will's entrance, Will flinched involuntarily. Hannibal lifted his free hand to rest it on Will's belly, stroking the skin reassuringly.

Hannibal's fingers touched his rim tentatively; he watched as the ring of muscle fluttered beneath his gaze, transfixed. He did only that for a while - Will assumed he was giving him time to adjust to the sensation, though that didn't seem to be happening: it felt weird, and foreign, and *wrong*.

'I'm going to insert one finger now, dear,' Hannibal warned, and Will felt an uncomfortable pressure, a sting, a persistent intrusion that just didn't belong.

'Fuck,' he groaned, trying not to squirm. His muscles seemed to be trying to push the finger out, and though Will's mind wanted that to happen, rationally he knew that the only way to minimize the pain was to try to relax as much as possible, permitting a smooth penetration.

Hannibal's finger continued advancing agonizingly slow until it was fully inside, at which moment the man smiled proudly at Will.

'You did very well, Will,' he praised, 'I will now begin to move it slowly, stretching you from within.'

Will groaned. Feeling Hannibal's finger prod and push against his inner walls was extremely uncomfortable, even as gently as he was doing it, and the only thing preventing his cock from softening completely was, embarassingly enough, Hannibal's picture before him, all hunger and need, pure adoration, stirring something low in Will's belly.

'How does it feel, love?' Hannibal asked in a soft tone, finger curling slightly.

'I hate it,' Will answered honestly, groaning.

'It'll take time to get used to,' Hannibal chuckled, fingers of his free hand raking through one of Will's legs, 'Have you truly never tried this before? Never imagined it, even?'

Will glared, words resentful when he spoke:

'You could pretend to be less satisfied, you know?

Hannibal smirked, 'I like being the one to introduce you to this, Will. The first one that gets to do it. The *only* one, 'the last bit was punctuated with a more forceful curling of his finger, his eyes flashing possessively.

Hannibal slowly receded the finger, then pressed it back in. He did this a few more times, then asked:

'Are you ready for another one?'

'No.'

Hannibal arched an eyebrow, seeming amused, 'Really? Your mind might object to the idea, but your body aches for it, 'he grazed the pad of a second finger around the rim, letting it slip inside.

'Fuck, no, I can't,' he could, he know he could, but he didn't want it, and this was his only valid excuse.

'Be honest with me, Will,' Hannibal's eyes danced - he was having fun. 'You can take one more, can't you? You can be good for me and take it.'

*Fuck.*

Will relented with a curt nod, 'Ok, ok, just give me a moment.'

'Of course, sweetheart,' Hannibal placed a chaste kiss to his knee, his free hand roaming gently across his skin.

Meanwhile, Will tried to calm himself. He knew relaxing was in his *own* best interest, but it irritated him that it coincided with Hannibal's. And the man's eyes, so scorching, so blinding with love, obsession, want, dizzied him, yet he found he couldn't look away - even now, though in his introspection his vision had turned blurry, his and Hannibal's eyes interlocked.

'Alright, you can do it now,' Will breathed the words out in a rush before he lost his resolve.

'Good boy,' Hannibal praised, overjoyed smile disarming, and Will's cock twitched and Hannibal smirked and Will was *mortified*.

The burn of the second finger was worse. Hannibal took longer to fully insert it, but it was still uncomfortable. Will wondered how good it would actually be if he *wanted it*, if he thought he'd get any stimulation from it - this way, he just felt empty and numb, letting Hannibal use him for his own enjoyment.

Hannibal began to scissor his fingers, and it was too much for Will.

'Hannibal, fuck, do something else,' he asked.

'What do you mean, dear?'

'I don't... I don't like this, ok? It doesn't feel well,' Will tried to convey his despair, hoping to appeal to the man.

'Don't worry, it will,' Hannibal promised in his most resolute, self-confident voice.

Will groaned in frustration.

'Then *distract* me or something,' Will sighed, disbelieving that he was truly saying those words, 'Please, I need something more.'

'Not yet, my love,' Hannibal shook his head with an apologetic smile, 'I want you to focus on the feel of penetration alone.'

Will narrowed his eyes, distrustful.

'You want me to feel nothing else but this, so I can't escape the sensation, so I have to *endure* it.'

Hannibal didn't look the slightest bit ashamed. If anything, the words spurred him on, his fingers spreading a bit wider, a bit deeper. He almost completely removed them from Will's heat, only to pour more lube on them, and then thrust in to his knuckles with an obscene sound that made him purr with arousal, while Will blushed to the roots of his hair.

'You get a very lovely frown when you're *focusing* on something, Will. When you're *taking it*,' Hannibal breathed out, fingers moving incessantly inside Will, working him open, while his other hand, seemingly of its own accord, nudged Will's legs impossibly wider, greedy to see all of him, 'But that's not my sole motivation. I do mean what I said: I could take you in my hand right now, or in my mouth, and have you writhing on my fingers; I could rub your prostate until you were sobbing beneath me - but that would only distract you from *this*,' Hannibal curled his fingers mischievously inside Will, earning a groan from the man, 'and I want you to really feel how it's like to have me *truly, deeply* inside you.'

'So you mean to say,' Will struggled to see past the superficial heat of Hannibal's words, the way they had been clearly strung along to arouse him, 'that you're purposefully devoiding me of all pleasure? Isn't that cruel for a man that just claimed to love me?'

Hannibal chuckled low in his throat; his free hand roamed teasingly around Will's cock, ghosting his fingers through it, not providing enough contact to stimulate his erection and give him something to distract himself with.

'I said I love you, Will, not that I don't like watching you squirm,' and the words seemed full of dark promises, filthy thoughts in Hannibal's mind. Will had the urge to recoil, and the morbid curiosity to find out more, 'I don't intend to hurt you, however; I can promise you that,' he added in a quieter, more vulnerable murmur.

Will sighed, 'You're not hurting me. You're... humiliating me.'

And how could he not feel humiliated, with Hannibal's fingers deft and persistent inside him, *intruding* him with the confidence of someone handling their own property, thrusting in and out of him with distasteful sounds that seemed to satisfy Hannibal so much; and with his body sweaty and red and *exposed*, and his face probably so broken and tired; biting his lip to keep himself from begging Hannibal to untie him, promising to be a *good boy* and keep still if Hannibal allowed him to rest his arms; and, worst of all, with his cock still slightly hard, still *wanting*?

'I've told you already, dear, there is nothing to be embarrassed about. Don't you see what you do to me when you're like this, so beautiful and open for me? Don't you see the power you have over me?' Hannibal stared at him with dark, worshipping eyes.

'Well, I'm sorry if it's a bit difficult to feel *powerful* right now,' Will said drily.

'Must you be powerful, however? Can't you let me steer, and trust me to know what's best for you?' Hannibal did what he'd denied Will earlier, then, and purposefully striked his prostate, finding it so quickly Will had no doubt he had already located it quite some time ago, and had eluded it for his own amusement. When the pad of his finger delicately pushed against that bundle of nerves, Will jumped, arching his back, overwhelmed at the unexpected, foreign and *otherwordly* sensation.

'Fuck, Hannibal...'

And Hannibal thrusted his fingers into Will differently now; not in the more careful, gentle way he'd done before, getting Will used to the stretch - now, he fucked his fingers into Will with newfound purpose, alternately grazing his prostate just enough to feel, obscene squelching noises as his fingers slid in and out of him.

'You mustn't worry about a thing, Will. I'm here for you, always. Let go for me, sweetheart, let me take care of you. Let yourself *feel it*.'

And Will was reeling, so dizzy and tired and confused, because right now, being fucked ruthlessly by Hannibal's fingers, his cock neglected as his core was struck and abused and *filled* like he was a *girl*, was starting, just slightly, just momentarily, to *feel good*.

'Fuck, you can't- you can't expect me not to be embarassed,' Will said through gasps and moans, 'You don't... fuck, you don't even take your clothes off.'

Hannibal's fingers lost their rhythm, which Will thought instinctively was a shame, because the small jabs to his prostate had been steadily filling his erection, and his silver blonde eyebrows arched up.

'Is that something you want?' his tone was teasing, devious, but hopeful, like it always was when the topic was Will reciprocating his feelings.

'No, I mean,' Will groaned, frustrated at not finding the right words, 'you keep me like this, so I'm more exposed than you.'

Hannibal stilled his fingers completely, his face taking on a pensive expression.

'I concede to your point,' Hannibal nodded, 'I have refrained from removing my own clothes, only because I already feel so vulnerable, so bare beneath your eye. I apologize.'

And Will truly should have guessed that his observation would bear no good, but he wasn't exactly in his right *mind*, and now Hannibal was swiftly withdrawing his fingers from inside him, so easily in fact that it left Will wondering exactly how slick and open he'd become, and starting to remove his clothes.

Or he would have, were he not suddenly transfixed with his own fingers, the ones that had just been inside Will.

'If you lick them clean, I swear to God I will scream, Hannibal,' Will warned.

But then Hannibal was redirecting his gaze at him, eyes overcome with desire, and Will saw that his intentions were entirely different.

'Do it for me,' Hannibal said, and his voice was gravely, overwhelmed with lust.

'I'm sorry?' Will's lips went slack with surprise; Hannibal's eyes zeroed on the movement with the attention  of a predator.

'Do it, Will. Taste yourself for me to see,' and Hannibal was moving up his body, slick fingers now resting ominously on his clavicle.

Will could only manage a disbelieving shake of his head.

'Will, sweetheart, please,' Hannibal pleaded, voice so low, so *wanton*.

'No,' Will murmured, completely incapable of saying anything else.

Hannibal's posture went rigid; his features  sharpened with a dangerous edge.

'I will tie your legs, if you don't.'

Will's soul went cold.

'That's below you, Hannibal.'

'Is this insignificant act of rebellion more important to you than your autonomy?' Hannibal inquired, smug and victorious, and Will could only think of how much Hannibal was taken by that desire, if he'd resorted to such pesky threats to ensure it. And the worst part was he had *succeeded* - Will couldn't bear the thought of being completely immobile, of being completely helpless, and so, just like that, Hannibal had won.

Will wanted to *scream*.

'Fuck you, Hannibal,' he whispered instead.

'Open your mouth, love' the man simply said, seeming absolutely overjoyed.

Will parted his lips just barely, watching closely as Hannibal gently settled the pads of his fingers on Will's bottom lip. He resisted the urge to bite them, and the urge to *cry*.

Hannibal slid his slick fingers into Will's soft mouth, right up to the knuckle. They were ridiculously warm, and tasted strangely - Will tried not to dwell too much on it, however. He tried to forget how demeaning it was, and focus on the fact that his legs were still untied.

Hannibal seemed thrilled. He moved closer, curling his body over Will's in a suffocating way, and placed his free hand on Will's cheek so he could feel, through the skin, the fingers inside his mouth.

'Please, Will,' Hannibal repeated once more, and his voice seemed so pleading, so admiring, that it felt as if Will truly had any power at all.

Will relented, and moved his tongue slowly, reluctantly, against Hannibal's fingers, licking the taste of lubricant and his own heat off the skin.

It unleashed from Hannibal a shaky breath and an endless prayer of praise:

'Oh, look at you, my love, look at you, so beautiful like this, my *good, good boy*,' he doted, and grazed his hand down Will's body so it was petting Will's stomach in loving circles, 'How do you taste, sweetheart? How does it feel to taste yourself?'

Hannibal's hand wrapped around Will's cock in a forceful grip; Will, surprised, whined around Hannibal's fingers as he suckled them, which caused a growl to erupt from Hannibal's throat.

'So perfect, Will, so gorgeous, moaning just for me,' his hand worked hard on Will's cock, fast and insistent, 'My *obedient* boy, doing as I tell you. Writhing for me, from my hand on you, from my hand *inside* you.'

Will was struggling to breathe through his nose, hips bucking mindlessly as Hannibal's grip never relented, bringing him closer and closer to orgasm.

'You have no idea how perfect you look, my love; how well desire suits you. So pretty, chasing your own pleasure,' and Hannibal sped up his strokes, until Will was biting his fingers completely accidentally, and so so close, his body tensing, toppling over the edge-

And then Hannibal stopped.

He removed his hand completely from Will's cock, and it twitched pathetically for a second, red and weeping, so full and aching, searching for further touch. Will felt tears coming to his eyes, so unbelievably frustrated it hurt.

'Shhh,' Hannibal said, gentle but amused, hand back to Will's stomach, petting it soothingly, 'Not yet, sweetheart, you must have patience,' and his voice was all sincere sugar and care, as if this had been Will's plan and he was sorry to disappoint, as if it hadn't been Hannibal to force him to the edge.

But of course, Will couldn't even voice any of these injustices because Hannibal was still thrusting his fingers into his mouth, toying with Will's tongue and the insides of his cheeks.

When Hannibal's fingers wrapped around Will's desperate dick once more, his left leg thrashed; his back arched as his mind, overrun with the need to *climax*, ordered his body to chase the feeling. But Hannibal's grip wasn't tight nor fast, just a constant, maddening touch.

And Will couldn't deal with it. Because his body surrended so helplessly - and it wasn't his *fault* - but he needed to show some form of retaliation, some physical sign of refusal, even if only to qualm his own mind.

So he pushed his hips firmly onto the mattress, recoiling from Hannibal's touch, and *bit.*

He sunk his teeth deep enough to bleed, to feel drops of metal red slither down his throat. Hannibal growled, surprised, and withdrew his fingers: rivers of blood ran smoothly down them.

He retracted his other hand as well. Will felt, for the first time that night, like he was *victorious*.

A silence settled between them; it echoed through the room like static.

'You bit me.'

Will rolled his eyes.

'Well,' Hannibal continued, gathering himself, 'it may have been for the best. I wished only to give you what you needed, what would bring you pleasure, but I lost myself in my desires. I apologize, Will.'

And how could it be that his one act of reprisal had, in the end, *pleased* Hannibal? How was it that biting him had evoked in his eye some sick twinkle of pride, and the indistinguishable fire of arousal?

It was only logical, if he thought it through: how could a cannibal not be turned on by biting?

'Will you tie me up now?'

Hannibal tightened his lips thoughtfully for but an instant; then, he shook his head.

'No, I don't think I will. I was being unreasonable. It was in your right.'

'You have a strange perception of right and wrong,' Will drawled.

'Yes, I believe we had already established that,' Hannibal chuckled, and gingerly placed his uninjured hand back on Will's belly. When Will flinched, his face seemed to drop for a second, 'Will you keep your promise, still?'

Will arched an eyebrow, unsure of what Hannibal meant. There was, however, a little softness in his features, in the shape of his brow, that suggested a hopefulness Will found rather unsettling.

'Will you bite if I attempt to kiss you again?' Hannibal clarified.

'Will you restrain my legs if I do?'

Hannibal sighed. His fingers splayed over Will's flesh, thumb rubbing small, loving circles on the skin.

'Must I threaten you with violence in order for you to allow me to kiss you?'

'Under the circumstances you yourself created, *yes*,' Will answered drily. He could not willingly accept a kiss from Hannibal, not in this situation, for if he allowed that, every other boundary would seem futile.

'Then I will,' Hannibal breathed out, looking resigned, if a bit disappointed.

'Alright,' Will nodded curtly, then redirected his gaze upwards, at his own wrists, so that he could avoid Hannibal's hurt expression. He knew this was all pretend - the threat was empty, a technicality that would put his mind at ease - but he still clung to it like a safety net.

Hannibal was silent for a moment, scrutinizing gaze on him. Then, he stood up in a pair of fluid motions, and Will heard the faint sounds of rustling fabric, meaning the man was taking off his own clothes.

It took a while, which wasn't surprising given Hannibal's neuroses concerning tidiness. Will even heard footsteps around the room, which he assumed was Hannibal hanging his suit somewhere proper. He closed his eyes, focused on his breathing, all the ridiculously cliche advice he'd never listened to but that now seemed so useful, almost as a placebo.

He still had his eyes closed when he felt the bed dip, and the burn of hot skin against his - it was intoxicating in the most disturbing kind of way. Will felt a slight tap on his cheekbone, and opened his eyes to see Hannibal's tentative gaze, a slim neck, the ridges of two clavicles.

Will blinked his eyes slowly, not knowing what to say. Hannibal exhaled, warm air swirling toward his face, and leaned in, kissing Will.

It was surreal, kissing Hannibal like this. Or, more accurately, *letting* Hannibal kiss him. It was different than when he'd been clothed; now it seemed infinitely more intimate: he could feel the solid surface of his torso against his own, the heat of his thighs where they fit

between Will's own. And though Will could try to distract himself with the chaste, gentle kiss, all passionate nibbling and apologetic tongue, the feel of Hannibal's straining erection against his stomach was unmistakable.

Hannibal was kissing him, *naked* and on top of him. He was sliding his tongue through pliant lips, tasting the inside of his mouth, and Will could only remember of when he'd been suckling on Hannibal's fingers, tasting lube and his own heat. He wondered if Hannibal could taste it too, if he was searching for it.

The thought made Will groan, a sound Hannibal eagerly took into his own mouth. He hadn't yet shown any signs of his own arousal, but now Will could discern this small, controlled thrusting of his hips, his dick sliding up and down Will's skin. Hannibal's breathing was haggard against Will's lips when he withdrew from the kiss.

'You are by far the best thing I've ever tasted,' Hannibal confessed. Will laughed, a disbelieving little huff, and Hannibal smiled adoringly, leaning in for another sweet kiss.

Will was starting to realize that Hannibal was actually a very good kisser. He either sucked or playfully bit in the perfect symphony of curves and angles; he slid his tongue expertly inside Will's mouth, *devouring* It was easy to get lost in it, and Will could not account for the litany of small noises coming out of him.

'Can you not picture us doing this every morning?' Hannibal said, voice low, seducing, 'You'd live here, sleep in this very bedroom with me. I'd keep you wrapped in the softest, most luxurious fabrics. Except when you were like this, of course,' Hannibal ghosted his hands teasingly over Will's naked skin.

Will let his head drop against the mattress, Hannibal immediately chasing his lips. He didn't know what to think, what to *say*, because he had never pictured it before, but now it all felt so strange and the fantasy seemed laid out so perfectly before him.

'You could have propositioned me, before all this,' he ended up saying, in lieu of any actual answer.

Hannibal smiled softly against his mouth; the gesture seemed disarmingly vulnerable.

'I did, countless times. I may have been too subtle.'

'Now you've been too brazen,' Will pointed out.

'But alas, it has worked,' Hannibal pressed an innocent kiss against the corner of Will's mouth, seeming so immensely satisfied with the small act, 'I believe in the end I could not let you leave me without *seeing*. I could not bear another moment of you not aknowledgeding my feelings.'

'Would you have let me leave?' Will murmured, the words breathed into Hannibal's lips.

'I had no plan as to what I would do. You were my future, Will, and when you walked away you took with you my ability to think ahead.'

Will didn't know how to answer, so he opted with silence. Hannibal seemed unperturbed by this, resting his forehead contently against Will's. They rested like this for one blissful moment where everything seemed warm and simple.

'Hannibal,' Will whispered.

'Yes, my love?'

'Can you untie my wrists, please? They really hurt.'

Oddly enough, Hannibal didn't seem alarmed by the request.

'I'll draw you a bath later, sweetheart, and massage your arms until the muscles relax. For now, it's best we keep them like this.'

'But it *aches*.'

Hannibal chuckled, nibbling at Will's bottom lip which, embarassingly enough, had curled into a slight pout. Will felt himself heat up, and knew Hannibal would notice the blush.

'Be patient, love. No need to whine,' Hannibal smirked at the last word, and Will only flushed deeper. Hannibal began leaving a trail of open-mouthed kisses down Will's neck, stopping to the left of his Adam's apple to mercilessly suck the skin there, creating a dark red mark, 'Shall we find something to put your mind off the pain?'

And then Hannibal was rising to his knees between Will's legs, and Will could see much more of his nude body; the patches of silver hair, the elegant angles of his shoulders, the solid, flat expanse of his stomach. He was broader than Will, and the contrast was all the more obvious with him standing on top of him, a figure of tanned skin and muscle over a paler, lither one.

Will's legs spread wider. As time passed, his lack of resistance seemed less and less relevant to him.

'I think you would welcome three fingers now, don't you think?' Hannibal said in the confident tone of rhetoricals. His fingers came to tease Will's hole, stretched rim fluttering beneath their firm touch.

Will crooked his neck to see, and pursed his lips when he saw Hannibal's fingers, still slick with blood, circling his hole.

'Don't you want to clean up first?' he asked with a shaky breath, wriggling around a bit. Hannibal only pressed further, getting all three fingers in past the first knuckle.

'It'll only ease the entrance, my dear.'

Will gasped when he felt the fingers slip in entirely with one precise jab to his prostate. Hannibal smirked and Will closed his eyes so he wouldn't have to see his smug expression.

'Perfect. Beautiful, Will,' the man praised, curling his fingers inside Will.

Will had never felt so filled before. It was unlike any pleasure he'd tried before. The novelty had wore off a bit and it actually felt *good* now. A nice warm feeling which tingled across his body with every thrust of Hannibal's fingers. A feeling of intrinsic connection, more intimate than any other touch.

Will moaned, short little things that always earned him a strike to his prostate as a reward. Hannibal's free hand completely ignored Will's dick, choosing instead to abuse every other inch of skin, from his nipples to his stomach and the juts of his pelvic bone.

'You look so pretty like this, sweetheart. So, so pretty,' Hannibal groaned, thrusts progressively deeper. Will was moving frantically now, not knowing whether he should press into the touch or recoil from it, but still gasping every time Hannibal stroke his prostate. The memory of his ruined release, his inability to fall off the edge still weighed in his conscience and made him buck against empty air, straining erection aching for some kind of friction.

'So beautiful, arching your back for me,' Hannibal cooed.

'Stop saying those things,' Will groaned, head hitting the pillow as he squirmed on the fingers inside him.

'Am I not allowed to speak the truth?' Hannibal inquired, more amused than anything.

'Hannibal, just-' Will started, but one firm press to his prostate effectively shut him up. He glared at Hannibal, certain that the man had done it on purpose.

'Is it the connotations adherent to the words?' he went on, reverting to his psychiatrist tone, but twisted now - playful, 'Do you not believe a man can be 'pretty' or 'beautiful'?' he curled his fingers, and Will felt a fourth one sliding in, drawing a moan from him, 'Would it offend you to know that I found you, in that first moment we met, when you stormed out on Jack and I, irresistibly *adorable*?' Will blushed, feeling instinctively humiliated, though the words now stirred something else in his stomach.

Hannibal was striking his prostate unrelentingly, which Will assumed was his way of making sure he wouldn't interrupt his speech - whenever he tried to cut him off, another contact sent his mind reeling, skin burning so much he was writhing for relief. But he couldn't tip over into climax, not without any stimulation to his erection which bobbed untouched and throbbing. He was stuck in the edge, and Hannibal was taking advantage of it.

'You deny enjoying this position because you find it stereotypically submissive; you deny enjoying my compliments and terms of endearment because you fear they hurt your masculinity. These misconceptions must go, Will. Don't stand in the way of your true nature.'

Will was straining against his restraints, hips rocking into empty air, needing just a *little* more to finally find relief. Hannibal's words were jumbled in his clouded mind, and he could barely find a response. It was all true, Will knew it, but it wasn't a selfless appeal - Hannibal wanted Will to admit he liked it, because he craved Will's love.

Will could confess to himself, in the privacy of his mind, but it was a very different story to confess for Hannibal to hear and rejoice.

So he didn't speak a word, moaning and whining instead as Hannibal mercilessly thrusted into him with four fingers, all the while denying his release. Even as he crawled up Will's body again to bring their faces together and kiss his cheeks passionately, he made sure to arch his body so Will couldn't use him for friction.

'You must admit it to yourself, my love. You must admit it to me,' he murmured in a tone which wavered between stating and begging. You enjoy being beneath me, my darling boy.'

'Hannibal, please...' he said, frustrated beyond belief, leaning into Hannibal's head which was nuzzling his neck.

'Please what, sweetheart?'

'Just let me, *please*, I just need a little more.'

'Don't you think you can reach orgasm just like this, from my fingers inside you?' Hannibal asked, sounding slightly indignant and redoubling his efforts so he was now pressing into Will's prostate at all times.

'No,' Will shook his head; he felt close to tears, 'I need *more*, Hannibal, I need you.'

He was surprised when the fingers inside him faltered - such was the problem with arousal, it overran everything else. He only understood the way his words could be interpreted when it was too late. Truly, he didn't know if his subconscious had arranged them in that way on purpose.

The fingers withdrew, and Hannibal's eyes searched his in unmistakable, impossible need.

'Of course, Will. Of course you'll have me.'

He sounded humbled, even, as if the words that had come out of Will's mouth were from some religious doctrine. He shifted a little, and Will held his breath as he saw him pick up the little bottle again and cover his own cock, rock hard also, with lubricant.

He didn't have it in him to argue. He simply didn't.

What would be the point?

He'd say no, and Hannibal would hear the word as a pesky obstacle that could be easily flattened. Every resistance on his part was humiliating for it was futile. This would happen, one way or another. He only had, if even that, the power to delay it for a few seconds by begging uselessly.

So he stayed quiet, staring, legs wide open and inviting, and feeling incredibly *empty* now that Hannibal wasn't in him anymore. It was almost like that feeling of loss that overcame him when he hadn't seen Hannibal in a while, and his mind began to fall into loneliness again.

His body wanted company, he guessed.

Someone to entwine with.

Hannibal lined his erection with Will's entrance, one hand holding himself and the other steadying Will's hip. He looked at him once, not really looking for confirmation, just *warning* him that that was indeed about to happen, and then began pushing in.

It was tough. Will was slick and Hannibal had prepared him thoroughly, but it was still a stretch. And the realization of what was happening had hit Will bluntly and cruelly - he was being *penetrated* by Hannibal and he felt so submissive, letting another man use his body like that, drill into him in search of pleasure. He felt open and vulnerable and the increasing pressure inside him *ached*.

Hannibal didn't say a word as he inched himself inside Will's heat. Will in turn focused on his breathing, eyes closed and conjuring pictures of vague comfort in order to find some sort of anchor.

'It's done,' Hannibal announced after a tense moment, exhaling raggedly as if he'd been holding his breath during the entire time. He looked at the place where his bodies connected, seeming in complete awe, 'May I move, Will?'

He considered the question somewhat dazedly. Again, it felt like his answer was of little to no consequence. Besides, it felt weirdly intimate to have Hannibal simply inside him - perhaps some movement would distract him.

'I guess. Yes.'

Hannibal smiled and slowly inched himself out, only to thrust back in. It was gentle, but it still made Hannibal groan, a blissful expression overcoming him. He kissed Will, chest meeting his in a scorching encounter of skin.

'How does it feel, my love?' he asked, words spoken directly to his lips, thrusting in and out again.

'I don't know,' Will said truthfully. It was this big, encompassing pressure; like he was irremediably connected to Hannibal.

Hannibal kissed him again, tongue meeting his and tracing the inside of his mouth.

'You feel exquisite, Will,' he said, so much vulnerable sincerity in his eyes, a contradiction of humbleness and pride brightening his features, 'You'll feel good in a moment too, sweetheart. Have patience,' he added with another kiss to the corner of his mouth.

Will chuckled, a sound made incredible breathless by the way Hannibal's thrusts slowly increased their pace.

'Do you want me to solely focus on the penetration again?'

'No, my sweet boy, I'll reward you now. I'll take care of you,' he pledged, but instead of finally touching Will's dick like he desperately craved, he shifted his hands so they were

placed on each side of Will's shoulders, supporting his weight, and began thrusting more forcefully into Will.

It was a very sudden transition: first Will merely felt full, incredibly and impossibly full, and then Hannibal stroke his prostate and everything became neon bright, staggering pleasure infiltrating every bit of his body. He made a chocked noise that sounded awfully like a broken scream, and Hannibal immediately hit that spot again, more precisely this time. Will felt like sobbing.

'Hannibal, *fuck*' he was rocking wildly against Hannibal now, meeting every thrust like his body had a will of its own. The pain in his wrists seemed unimportant now and he actively fought against the ties, trying to slide down on the bed and toward Hannibal.

'How does it feel now, Will? How do you feel?'

Will groaned, his orgasm approaching so intensely he almost wanted to hide from it. Hannibal moved so forcefully that the bed was rocking with him, creaking sinfully - that, the sound of skin on skin as Hannibal repeatedly slid in and out of Will, and the moans they both let out was a dizzying symphony of obscenities.

'Tell me, sweetheart. Use your words for me,' Hannibal insisted, his tone once more between ordering and pleading. He looked so huge now, magnificent in the way his muscles flexed above Will, the way his silver hair fell on his forehead and his face tensed. He looked like a god.

And Will felt like one.

'It's like... it's like we're *more*.'

The breath Hannibal let out was nothing short of euphoric.

'Oh, my beautiful, beautiful Will. How pretty you look being filled by me,' he cooed, gentle tone a maddening opposite to the brutal way he thrusted into Will, 'How I love you so completely, my *good* boy. You can come for me now, can't you? Just from having me inside you. Come for me, Will, let me see it.'

And Will, feeling as if he had reached a new chapter, not only emotionally but physically, by experiencing this new and unique kind of pleasure, came untouched, spilling in white stripes across his and Hannibal's bellies.

He swore he blacked out for a second. The orgasm coiled tightly in his insides and Hannibal's thrusts drew the pleasure out endlessly. When he felt his conscience return, he was still getting pounded into the mattress, sticky come itching on his skin, and he became suddenly aware of how *sensitive* he felt.

'Hannibal,' he gasped, and his tongue felt annoyingly heavy, 'Hannibal, it's too much.'

'I know, sweetheart,' the man answered in the condescending tone of who isn't going to slow down at all, 'You can take it for me, can't you?'

Will whined, unsure. The overstimulation was painful, confusing signals short-circuiting his mind. His dick was soft and spent, but his hole was still getting mercilessly filled, once and once again, as Hannibal chased his own pleasure.

'Do you see, Will? You belong to me, and I to you. Our bodies are one,' Hannibal growled, his words unfiltered, 'I would have you like this every moment of every day, if I could: in the morning, I'd slip inside you while you were still asleep, or wake you with my mouth and hand on you; in the nights, I'd bring you to climax so many times you'd collapse beside me and sleep contently the entire night; in the kitchen, the dining table, the office where I sought for signs of your feelings toward me - we could have all of this, my love, my sweet boy,' he stared at Will with fierce love in his dilated pupils, a need so intense it defined his entire being, 'We could have all of this, Will. We *will* have all of this.'

And with that, Hannibal came, hips rocking so roughly into Will that there'd surely be bruises, and his head dropping onto Will's shoulder. Will could feel Hannibal's dick throb inside him for what felt like forever, and whimpered in overstimulation as Hannibal continued thrusting into him to ride out his orgasm.

It took a moment for Hannibal to settle. When he did, he seemed to deflate over Will, setting almost his entire weight over him, his dick still inside him, slick with his own release.

'Hannibal,' Will whispered after the man had remained silent for too long.

'I have never felt anything as sublime as you, my love. You are heaven for every sense.'

Will sighed. Hannibal's compliments were convoluted in the most charming way.

'Can you...?' he started, wiggling his hips a bit so Hannibal would get the message.

'Ah, of course,' Hannibal directed him a languid smile and slowly withdrew from Will, kneeling beside Will's limp legs. Immediately, Will felt Hannibal's release drip out of him, and watched as Hannibal collected the leaking come with his fingers, only to push it back inside Will. He did this a couple more times, making sure his come stayed inside Will, a proof that he'd been so deep inside him.

'What now?' Will asked, because now that he wasn't blinded by arousal anymore the exhaustion in his bones and the cutting ache in his wrists had returned viciously.

Hannibal drew another smile - he looked like he was surrounded by complete bliss, as if there were no worries in the world.

'Now I clean you up.'

Will frowned, unsure of what he meant until he saw Hannibal unceremoniously dip down to lick hotly along Will's shaft. It was like his entire body was overheating.

'Hannibal, *enough*' he whined weakly. He was tired of stimulation, of this insidious thing that made him unable to think.

'Shhh, sweetheart,' was Hannibal's obnoxious response. He licked Will's limp cock diligently, getting every little drop of his release and ignoring every flinch from Will, whose sensitive skin was screaming beneath the touch.

He was certain that Hannibal was done. He couldn't see any more signs of come anywhere. Hannibal had even licked his belly clean. Still, the man kept suckling and licking, not looking like he intended to stop.

'Hannibal, are you done?' Will asked impatiently, groaning when Hannibal's hands came to grip his hips and stop him from squirming, forcing him to endure the stimulation.

'You do remember what you told me, Will?' Hannibal replied lightheartedly, mouth never straying far from Will's soft cock, 'You said you could come one more time for me, and I vowed we'd beat that goal, didn't I?'

Will's eyes went wide with terror.

'You're crazy.'

Hannibal patted his hips reassuringly.

'Stay still for me, sweetheart, and let me pleasure you. You'll see how your body responds to me.'

And then Hannibal was swallowing him down without further preamble, deep into his throat and with dizzying suction, and Will *sobbed*. He didn't want to, and he felt completely bereft of dignity, but it was too much too soon and each one of his nerves was strung so tight that he couldn't help it - he began crying as Hannibal forcefully took him down, not letting him squirm or move or do anything but *let him*.

He didn't know if he was going to get an erection again, and he feared that Hannibal would persist even though Will was sure it wouldn't happen. He couldn't handle much more of this - it felt so overwhelming, and the fact that he couldn't shy away from it only made it worse. He was trapped under Hannibal's will, and if Hannibal wanted to suck him down until he was begging, then inevitably that's what would happen.

It didn't feel real when his dick started filling again. It was like the blood now filling his member was coming directly from his brain, leaving him progressively dizzier as his erection grew. Hannibal, on the other hand, seemed over the moon, sucking more and more enthusiastically and bobbing his head with newfound vigor, a smug twinkle in his eyes that made Will furious, because he knew what was going on in Hannibal's head: he was thinking that he could manipulate Will's body at his will, that he was right yet again and Will was wrong and paying for it, and the worst part was he was *right.*

'Hannibal, stop,' Will chocked on another sob, and hated how small his voice sounded. He especially hated how Hannibal's eyes only darkened in response: he liked seeing Will cry.

Will was actually trying to squirm away, forcing Hannibal to keep his grip on Will's hips ruthless at all times. That didn't seem to distract him much, however - Hannibal was using

every trick he had, from hollowing his cheeks to sliding his tongue across the slit, grazing his teeth teasingly and occasionally moving to swallow down each of Will's balls. Every sound Will made spurred him on, and when he withheld them Hannibal only tried harder, in order to make it impossible for Will to stay silent. All in all, there was nothing Will could do to get a more merciful treatment, and he was left to endure it and see his erection growing more and more desperate inside Hannibal's mouth.

'Hannibal, it really hurts, can you *please* just slow down?' he pleaded, eyes finding Hannibal's between the locks of silver hair which were in a wild disarray and trying to convey as much submission as possible, a small offering for mercy. Hannibal's eyes stayed determined, however, so intense it was intimidating, and Will once more remembered he was being swallowed down by a cannibal.

The thought, distressingly enough, only brought him closer to that tortuous edge.

'Hannibal, stop, stop, *fuck*,' he babbled between breaths and sobs, his mind trying to hide and his body not knowing whether it should fight to squirm away or to thrust deeper into Hannibal's warm mouth. The edge was normally so appealing to him but now he knew it would hurt, he knew it would be unlike anything he ever felt.

And it was. It was a sensation separate from ejaculation - he only spilled a little into Hannibal's eager mouth, but his body thrummed with transcending pleasure, so much so he arched his back like a man possessed and screamed, overruled by this sweet pain which drowned his senses.

Hannibal kept bobbing his head throughout Will's orgasm, watching with glazed eyes as Will twitched and moaned and then settled with a long, exhausted sigh. Then, he finally let Will's cock slip from his mouth and wiped his lips with the back of his hand, crawling up Will's body to force his own lips apart and bluntly insinuate his tongue between them. Even in his dazed state, Will knew Hannibal's purpose - he wanted Will to taste himself, his own release in Hannibal's tongue.

'You did so well, sweetheart. Such a good boy for me, letting me spoil you,' Hannibal doted on him, pressing kisses along his cheeks and neck, nibbling carelessly so that each little bite stung. His hands moved possessively over Will's chest, flicking his nipples mischievously. When Will didn't even flinch, he raised an eyebrow in a playful expression, 'Are you all tired out, love?'

Will simply glared. What a stupid question to ask.

'Don't worry, Will, you can rest now,' he assured in a gentle tone, and Will thought he'd never heard more appealing words before.

He was about to summon the strengths to ask Hannibal to untie his wrists once more when he felt Hannibal's fingers prod his hole again. He frowned at the man, who was still looking at him like he was genuinely worried, like he wanted him to rest.

'What are you doing?' Will managed, feeling Hannibal's fingers penetrate his still wide and wet hole in one smooth thrust.

'Close your eyes, sweetheart. Don't worry about a thing,' Hannibal cooed, but then he was pressing into Will's prostate with two fingers and the pain was *excruciating*.

'Hannibal, I can't, seriously,' he whimpered, tears running thickly across his cheeks.

Hannibal kissed the glistening lines where Will's tears slithered down, his lips and eyes so sweet and gentle even though his fingers were torturing him. They massaged his prostate without a pause or break, making it a constant pressure and pain inside him.

'Let me do this for you, love. Let me see you like this,' Hannibal asked, voice pitched low and brimming with desire, and Will knew that this wasn't about him: Hannibal craved to see Will broken, to feel like he was the only one who could push Will's limits, the only one who could use Will's body as he wished.

'It hurts too much,' he said, legs spasming where they laid on the mattress.

'You can take more, Will. I know you can,' Hannibal reassured him, still placing apologetic kisses along Will's skin, 'You look so pretty like this, so tired already. I'll help you, sweetheart, we'll make it so that before the year ends you'll only be sated when you're like this, crying and begging for me,' Hannibal's fingers never stopped prodding Will's prostate but his dick remained soft, and Will *knew* he wouldn't be able to get another erection. The idea that Hannibal would only relent when the impossible happened made even more tears escape him, fueled by helpless despair.

'You're doing so well, sweetheart. Do you know how sinful you feel, so warm and tight around me, my release still painting your walls? We'll buy you something to plug you up, my precious boy, so you can always carry my seed inside you,' Hannibal went on, fantasies clearly intended to help Will regain his arousal, but working him up as well - Will could see that Hannibal had thought of them extensively before, had probably seen it unfold time and time again in his mind palace.

The overwhelming feeling in his prostate wasn't specific to one spot anymore; it vibrated in his entire body now, not quite pain nor pleasure, just an unsettling tingling that scared him.

'Do you know who you are, Will?'

Will looked at Hannibal, but didn't answer.

'You're my good boy. Say it,' Hannibal insisted, and Will knew this had all amounted to this: Hannibal needed Will to confess his love, to confess their connection. It was the thing he most desired, and he hoped that in this semiconscious state Will would not be able to resist him.

Still, Will tried, which only earned him more unbearable pressure on his prostate.

'Tell me, Will. Tell me who you've always been.'

Will was shaking, unable to think about anything but the blinding sensation that Hannibal's persistent fingers were drawing out of him.

'You love me, Will. You have never felt anything as pleasurable as being completely filled by me, as reaching your orgasm by that feeling alone; and you will come for me again now, Will, like the obedient boy you are, and *tell me*.'

'Hannibal-' Will tried to say anything but no words fit; he thought he was still crying but he wasn't sure, his vision was blurry on the sides, only Hannibal's face emerging crystal clear.

'Say it for me now, Will,' Hannibal growled, and he seemed so inhuman in that moment, consumed by a passion that could only be created from a higher entity, that Will couldn't refuse him anymore.

'I am, I am, Hannibal,' he whispered, stumbling over the words.

'What are you, Will?'

'Your good boy,' he said brokenly.

It felt like a pledge. A vow intrinsic to his life.

'Oh, my love,' Hannibal preened, eyes brimming with holy tears, otherworldly joy glistening in his smile, and his fingers pressing in cruelly, making Will sob, 'Tell me again, who are you to me?'

'I'm your good boy, Hannibal...' Will didn't know if he believed the words; he knew, however, that they were absolutely true.

'Yes, you are, my perfect little boy, so so beautiful for me. You'll come a fourth time for me now, won't you? Just for me, like the good boy you are.'

With one final jab to his prostate, Will came.

It was nothing like he'd ever experienced. His dick was still soft, and nothing spilled out - he might have found it humiliating, were he able of such a complex thought; instead, it was this incredible throbbing across his body, this infinity of waves that drowned his senses and confined him inside himself, cut off from the world and forced to focus solely on that feeling.

He wished he had blacked out, but he was always just an inch inside of consciousness.

When he came back to the outside world, body still tingling and every muscle numb, Hannibal was still looking at him with that unusually blissful and relaxed look. Will realized Hannibal was raking his curls with one hand and gently stroking his stomach with the other, soft gentle touches that seemed painfully genuine.

'Hannibal,' he managed, voice so hoarse it surprised him.

'Yes, love?'

All he wanted was to curl up and sleep.

'Wrists.'

Hannibal smiled fondly at him, getting up from the bed.

'Let me draw you a bath first, Will, and then I'll untie you.'

Will frowned and called out weakly before Hannibal could leave.

'Hannibal, come on, please.'

'I'll be gone but a moment, sweetheart. Be a good boy and wait.'

And then Hannibal left, that adoring smile on his face, and Will sunk into the bed, muscles pliant and breath calm, enduring.

Chapter End Notes

I do hope you enjoyed it! <3

Any criticism is welcomed!

Oh, and if anyone's got any alternate ideas as to how it should have gone, or just has a specific scenario they'd like me to make come to life, feel free to comment below!~

# Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

We're back! The story has been extended, so there's this chapter and a third one for sure. The existence of a fourth is debatable. We shall see!!

Friendly neighborhood disclaimer: dub-con is still prominent here! It's always gentle, always aiming to please Will, but Jesus fucking Christ is he conflicted.

Well, without further ado, I present fresh new 10.000 words of dark, twisted Hannigram!
~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will wanted to sleep.

It was a primitive truth that weighed in his bones; exhaustion, simple and sensorial in its purest stare, rendered him illiterate, so that all other thoughts, which were a jumble of controversial words, seemed not only illegible but completely uninteresting.

His only focus was on falling asleep. Melting into the mattress: maybe, if he were lucky, melting right through the floor beneath him and settling between the quietude of dirt and rock.

A peaceful place where no one would find him.

And with every breath, waves of calm swayed above him, washing with them lingering bits of his resolve. Solitude was sinfully easy. He was the effortless self that only lonely walls got to see.

Under the warm light of the bedroom, Will drifted off to sleep.

It was the lightest flurry of shadows shuffling around in the dark, the beginnings of a dream still forming its limits, a decadent fluttering of eyelids - a second of rest.

Then, someone tapped him on the shoulder. He was lifted from his home amidst the bedrock, and opened his eyes to the god of the world above.

'Your bath is ready, Will,' came Hannibal's voice, consonants softened and lowered in the apologetic tone of who's woken someone.

Will blinked. He let his vision clear; Hannibal's features were composed, but in a new way - he'd gathered himself, restored the elegance inherent to his person, but those inane ornaments he used for the world were primly stored out of view.

He was wearing a silk robe. At least that saved Will the troublesome imposition of magnificent skin.

'I think it'd be better if we got you cleaned up before sleep,' the man continued, rousing Will further from his fleeting rest.

Will sighed. The problematic angles and dead-ends of his circumstances were coming back to him.

'You have to untie me first,' he reminded, words rough. He was angry at himself: he could read his thoughts again, write them in passionate dissertations, and exhaustion now seemed like such a pesky problem, something to be dutifully ignored - how could he have wasted time sleeping, when he should have been thinking of what to do?

'Of course,' Hannibal promptly agreed. He lifted his hands toward Will's wrists, beginning to untie the knots which had been restraining him. When Hannibal first grazed his skin, Will flinched.

'Is the skin very sore?' he frowned, worry tensing his lips.

Will nodded. He'd flinched because Hannibal had touched him, but it didn't seem right to disclose it.

'They're sturdy knots,' he observed, hints of bitterness in the uptick of his lips.

Hannibal smiled. He freed Will's left hand, and moved on to his right one.

'I can teach you to make them, if you'd like.'

'Wouldn't that interfer with your own purposes?' Will arched an eyebrow skeptically - knowing how to tie a knot was knowing how to untie it.

'I could restrain you with handcuffs instead,' Hannibal smirked, tone suggestive as he finished freeing Will, 'Unless you prefer silk, of course.'

'I prefer moving, Hannibal,' Will retorted drily. He wanted to examine his wrists, but Hannibal was nursing them in his own hands, fingers insistingly prodding raw skin.

'You look loveliest when you're fighting your limits, Will,' Hannibal looked down at him with warm eyes, an admiring red bleeding into the usual maroon. He finally let go of Will's wrists and Will gathered them in his lap, the muscles in his arms whining and biting at each other. Furious pink and purple circles curled around the skin, all fading shades and stinging grooves.

It didn't look good. They were bruises. Blood beneath his skin.

It didn't look good.

But it could, if Will tried.

Because from beside him were Hannibal's eyes, and in his irises were reflected not pitiful contusions but bracelets of precious jewels which with time would turn to yellow and become gold.

He could choose the world of objective truth, if such a thing existed, and shiver at the blood vessels broken within him, or seek relief in twisted thoughts.

Waiver common sense and see the beauty.

Wasn't that art?

No. It was madness.

'Will?' came Hannibal's voice to rouse him once again, 'Shall we go?'

'Hum,' Will swallowed, ripping his eyes off  his wrists and landing them right on Hannibal's worried ones, 'Yes. Ok.'

He moved tentatively; it felt strange to close his legs, something Will found incredibly humiliating, and the pain on his arms - from his tense shoulders to his fingers, which he'd tightened into fists for most of what had happened - was piercing.  Every fiber felt stretched beyond belief, every tendon rigid and inflexible.

He slid his legs off the edge of the bed and immediately felt Hannibal's hand on his thigh, the other on his shoulder.

He looked quizzically up at him.

'Let me carry you, love. You're tired,' was Hannibal's explanation, all fond concern and ill-hidden urge to *touch*.

Will stiffly rolled his shoulder, dislodging Hannibal's hand and biting off a pained groan. He tried to get up, only for Hannibal's hand, the one still on his thigh, to press him forcefully back down.

'Don't be foolish, Will,' he chastised, 'You're obviously in no condition to walk.'

Will's eyebrows raised. He now realized that he was still completely bare, and that Hannibal's hand on his upper thigh was insufferably intimate, but when he tried to move his leg away the hand only clamped down harder, possessive and authoritarian.

'I thought I looked better when I was pushing my limits,' he huffed wryly.

'You also look good when you allow yourself to indulge in decadence,' Hannibal's thumb circled the soft flesh of Will's inner thigh, 'Let me carry you, sweetheart; let us both indulge ourselves.'

Will clenched his teeth, jaw tensing into a chiseled line. It was such a small thing when in comparison to the ways he'd already been violated that night, but Will was reluctant to drop it - all he could do, after all, was win the small battles.

'Thanks, but I'm fine,' he answered curtly, and pushed himself up with every phantom bit of strength he could conjure, standing on wobbly legs.

He could hear Hannibal sighing from behind him, and for one self-satisfying moment he felt victorious.

Then, he ventured a first step, and felt a strong arm circle his waist just as his knees were about to crumble beneath him.

'You're insufferable, did you know that?' Hannibal said with an amused smile, words light with the condescending levity of someone witnessing a child's hijinks. He guided Will toward the door in slow, patient movements, and kissed the top of his curls in an unbearably sweet gesture. Will suspected it had been specifically designed to further unnerve him.

It was easier than believing it had been bereft of ill intent.

Hannibal helped him all the way to the bathroom, arm looped securely round his hips as Will leaned heavily against his side. His robe felt soft. Irreprehensible, like everything Hannibal owned.

The bathroom was an enclosure of soft scented steam; it clung to Will's skin with the purple tinge of lavender and the smooth slide of vanilla. Candles fluttered in warm, gentle flames; the marble slabs shone in bashful flashes of yellow. Against the farthest wall was a spacious clawfoot tub filled with steaming water.

Hannibal guided him to the edge of it, and Will stepped in. It felt sinfully good; like his muscles were dissolving as they sunk below the rippling surface. He fully laid down with a contented sigh, back settling against the tub.

He could sleep there. He could rest his head and let the steam blurry his eyesight. He could try to forget.

He could, if only Hannibal weren't still there. Beside him, standing, unfairly tall and broad, caging him in.

'Do you mind?' Will hissed, eyes snapping open again to stare at the man impatiently.

Hannibal, in a show of innocent confusion, tilted his head.

'What do you mean?'

Will didn't want to form composed sentences, to battle with good sense and reason; he wanted to sink into the water.

'Could you give me some privacy, please?'

Hannibal had the boldness to look undignified:

'You're exhausted, Will, what if you fall asleep in here? I'd be negligent to leave you.'

Will glared. Hannibal's closed features screamed second intentions.

'What a feeble excuse.'

Hannibal smirked and kneeled promptly beside the tub. Beside Will. Suffocating in his closeness, in his hunger, in his hands which settled on the marble edge; so present all the time, inching relentlessly toward Will.

But Will's arms were underwater, and water had a way of seeming unmovable sometimes. He didn't think he could move. Not anymore. He was water now; he was marble.

'Your safety is no excuse, Will,' Hannibal said, that mischievous smile still tilting his lips, 'I want only what's best for you.'

He rolled up the sleeves of his robe and dipped his fingers into the warm water, just a little, so the pads of his fingers wavered a few inches above Will's slippery skin. Will twisted his legs, a half-hearted movement to cover himself.

'You're so tired, my love. Close your eyes for me, rest,' Hannibal's tone was unnervingly seducing. Will felt his eyelids flutter.

But his body was his own. Will had control; in the little things, he did.

'Let me wash up quickly, and then I'll sleep,' he insisted. He needed a private moment to collect his thoughts, to reclaim his flesh as his own, to touch it for himself.

'You'll enjoy it more if I do it for you,' Hannibal stated simply, like confidence made it all real and apparent.

Will felt infuriatingly helpless. His hand lifted from the water, pinching the bridge of his nose.

'Hannibal, no, I can't-'

'You can,' and Hannibal brought his hand back down, fingers so tender around his own, and looked at him sternly, 'Stay still, Will. Allow me.'

Will tensed as Hannibal fetched a washcloth and lathered it in something smelling of pretentious exoticism - Hannibal's own body wash. As Hannibal brought down the cloth on Will's chest, he couldn't help but wonder if their scents would become the same; if he'd smell like a killer.

Hannibal's ministrations were careful. His free fingers trailed idly across skin, while the washcloth travelled more methodically up and down. It tingled in Will's skin, and made bubbles swirl atop the water.

It was soothing. Will felt calm; the soft circles on his stomach were dizzyingly pleasant. He could sleep like this; he could compartmentalize the guilt and anger; he could slip away.

So, of course, Hannibal spoke.

'Do you indulge in baths often, Will?'

'What do you think?' Will retorted drily. He'd never used the bathtub at his own place.

Hannibal chuckled. He slid the washcloth down to Will's thighs, drawing small circles on the skin as deft fingers prodded at the muscles. One wandered far, poked a tense knot just beneath the surface, and Will stifled a groan.

Hannibal smiled.

'Are you enjoying this one?' he purred, and nudged the knot again.

'Fuck, Hannibal,' Will gasped, thigh flinching under the man's hand.

'Yes, sweetheart, right here,' he praised, other hand coming to fondle Will's curls, 'Relax, dear, let me take care of you.'

Hannibal's fingers skillfully worked the tense muscle, prodding with a merciless rhythm that sent alternating waves of pain and pleasure throughout Will's spine; the contradictory sensations rattled within him. His thighs fell open, inhibitions forgotten; a soft whimper escaped him as the tension seemed to grow impossibly tight under his skin, only to then unfurl suddenly, muscle distending and softening beneath Hannibal's touch.

'Where else, love?' Hannibal asked, fingers raking across the tender spot he'd been working.

Will looked at him. He didn't know what he meant. He wanted to sleep.

'Where else does it hurt?' Hannibal repeated, patient despite his obvious wish of having Will speak out his discomforts, so Hannibal himself could soothe him - a benefactor, a saviour.

Will stayed silent. It hurt everywhere; after a while, the pain became its own physical state, like hunger or exhaustion, so that he couldn't pinpoint the place from where it sprouted.

Hannibal decided to be thorough; he brushed the washcloth across the plains of Will's skin, through dips and curves, lathering him up with fragrant bubbles; round his knees, down his shins and toward his feet, up again to recheck every spot, firmly pressing the flesh to try and erupt another sound from Will - everytime he found another knot, Will was helpless to hide it, and he'd drop his head against the tub's edge or grab it tightly with white knuckles; this only pleased Hannibal, of course, making his prods deeper and more purposeful, releasing all the tension from Will's body.

It nearly felt selfish, seeing Hannibal strive to make him feel well. But then the steam would clear from Will's head, the tiredness would give into bouts of sharp perceptiveness, and he'd see that the act was selfish, but not on his part - Hannibal was enjoying it immensely, this caring for Will, this moment of having him exposed and pliant in the water, whimpering

softly under his gentle touches; not sexual, rather unbearably intimate. He imagined a different context in his reality shaping mind: a context where Will had asked this of him, had kissed Hannibal and murmured it against his lips, and now Hannibal was obliging his beloved with all the tenderness in the world. And not only was he imagining it - he *anticipated* it, as if he was sure it was bound to happen, and he couldn't wait.

The idea of this, and the content look on Hannibal's face, his pleased hum as he bent Will's knee and kissed it, and brought the washcloth back to circle his stomach, knowing Will was always helpless to it, made Will panic. The situation seemed ridiculously domestic, and worryingly *consensual*.

'Hannibal, let me up,' he said, hands gripping the edge of the tub to try and hoist himself up.

Hannibal's hand immediately tensed against his belly; fingers splayed firmly over it.

'Not yet, Will,' his voice was a warning, like  Will was *misbehaving*.

Will hated it.

'Hannibal, seriously, I'm done with this. Let me go.'

He tried to stand, but Hannibal's hand pressed him down. His muscles were whining; he couldn't fight.

'You're going to stay right here.'

'Why?' Will's desperate eyes locked with Hannibal's impassive, unwavering ones.

'Because I said so, darling. If you want to argue, I'll restrain you and you'll end up here still,' Hannibal stated, not unkindly, just honestly; he liked these sentences where he could so blatantly show his control, his assertiveness over Will, but it was tinged with bittersweetness - he wanted Will to like this; no restraints, no threats, just Will enjoying his touch.

Will deflated against the tub, teeth clenched. He didn't have the strength to fight, nor to hide his thoughts.

'I fucking hate this,' he sighed, voice small and cracking.

'I know,' Hannibal said, leaning over to place a kiss on Will's temple, 'You hate the doubts in your head, the resistance. If only you relinquished them, Will, you could enjoy this, enjoy being with me.'

Will didn't answer, looking blankly at the end of the tub. Hannibal sighed and moved so that he was kneeling behind Will's head, chest against his tousled curls, hands gently coming to lift Will's arms from the water and drape them atop the edges of the tub. He rubbed tentative circles on his upper arms, kissed his nape and the top of his head almost hesitantly.

It was impossible, Will thought, how Hannibal could still seem so disappointed by Will's reluctance; how he could still seem so vulnerable, so desperate for any warm signs from Will,

any token of acceptance. How he still touched him apologetically when he thought he had angered him.

'How about I soothe the ache in your arms and then we'll get you to bed? Would you like that?' he asked in a hopeful tone.

Will thought about it. It was a decent plan; his arms did hurt, and Hannibal was obviously skillful at it. Arguing was pointless, and that thought made him feel comfortable enough to admit, inside his own mind, that the suggestion actually sounded very alluring.

'Yeah. Yeah, okay,' he nodded, his previous bite all gone. Tired and resigned. Surrendering himself to Hannibal's care.

'There you go, sweetheart,' Hannibal beamed, sounding grateful, relieved, 'Sit up a little for me then, head back.'

Will did as instructed, noting that the movements led his head to rest against Hannibal's chest. It felt maddeningly warm.

Hannibal's fingers began to trail down Will's arms, massaging the tension away. The nodes softened and unraveled under his touch, fibers stretching and shrinking. Will observed the rhythmic motions of Hannibal's hands with half opened eyes, finding the entire scene helplessly hypnotic - his head dropped back further, fully against Hannibal's solid form; with this, the man seemed to relax as well, like he'd been waiting for this subtle sign of reciprocation from Will.

Once his fingers reached Will's wrists, they brushed over it tenderly.

'Is it still hurting?'

Will shook his head, and craned his neck to look up at Hannibal; Hannibal's eyes came down to meet his and, as they did, softened in such a way that Will felt unbearably overwhelmed, his glance skittering away.

'I dislike the idea of tying you up again and worsening the bruises. Perhaps I could leave you unrestrained, if you promised to behave,' Hannibal's fingers entwined with Will's, massaging his hands, 'Unless you'd prefer to be tied, so you don't have to busy yourself thinking of a way to escape.'

Will laughed, a small, rough thing.

'You can't ask me what I'd prefer, Hannibal.'

Hannibal laughed too, his chest shaking against Will's head.

'Why not? I would agree to it.'

'If you don't tie me up, I'll go,' Will sighed.

'I could make you stay,' Hannibal stated, pressing a sweet kiss to his curls.

'But I have to fight, Hannibal, if you give me the power to,' and it seemed so strange to admit this, but it was true - it was easier to stay restrained; a reminder that he wasn't there willingly; if he had nothing to physically deter him, than he feared he'd begin to accept it, begin to blur the lines between what Hannibal wanted and Will wanted.

Captives were always tied up. If he wasn't, would he stop thinking of himself as one?

'Very well, I think I shall tie you up, then,' Hannibal said, because Hannibal *knew* Will.

But Will had to insist now. For the sake of his conscience. To tell himself he had tried.

'Don't.'

'I will,' Hannibal stated with another kiss to his head.

Will sighed. He wanted to yell at himself. Yell at Hannibal. Yell at everything.

But he also wanted to thank him. So, subtly, softly, he brushed his thumb against Hannibal's, once, twice - the smallest token of gratitude.

Hannibal hummed contently from behind him, and resumed his ministrations up Will's arms.

On Will's part, he finally closed his eyes, letting the confident touches lull him until he was wavering between consciousness and sleep. They stayed like this for a moment, mindless and peaceful, warm vanilla steam around them.

Then, Hannibal dipped his hands in the water, and ran his heated fingers teasingly up Will's arms, leaving warm droplets across them.

Will moaned. He was too relaxed to care.

'Does that feel well, sweetheart?' Hannibal murmured, his soft accent sounding gentler than ever.

Will didn't answer, but he moaned again when Hannibal curiously repeated the action.

'Tell me how it feels,' Hannibal went on, eager as always to have Will voice his pleasure.

'I don't feel like talking,' Will mumbled back. He really didn't - it brought him farther from the edge of sleep.

'I want to know. Tell me, please, Will.'

Will made a sound between a sigh and a groan.

'Fuck off.'

It wasn't the cleverest thing to say. Hannibal didn't usually like crudeness, and it certainly wasn't a sentence that would deter further conversation - if anything, it'd result in some condescending scolding.

However, to Will's surprise, Hannibal chuckled, ducking to playfully bite his ear.

'Such a rude little boy.'

The low, rough words, riddled with affection and deposited directly into his ear, only made him more awake.

'Hannibal,' he groaned, 'you treat me like a child.'

'Yes,' Hannibal purred, nibbling at his earlobe, 'My little, little boy.'

'*Fuck*, Hannibal' the words felt strange, but not *wrong*.

'My pretty, insatiable boy,' and Hannibal's right hand was dipping into the water, and Will watched in horror as it encircled his soft, pink dick.

'No, I can't,' he whined, straining to move away, but Hannibal's other hand came to steady him.

'I know,' he reassured him, nuzzling his jawline.

'Then what are you doing?'

'Touching,' Hannibal's hand lazily fondled Will's sensitive cock, not quite strokes, just a teasing contact.

Will frowned, turning his head to look at Hannibal. His lips brushed the skin of the man's chest, and he heard him bite off a groan.

"Well, stop.'

Hannibal chuckled, pads of his fingers still lazily ghosting over Will's dick.

"Where may I touch you, then?'

Will considered the question. Was he supposed to answer in honesty? To deny him an answer at all? He didn't want to resist, to go over their rigged game where Hannibal pressed on and on for Will to fold. An answer, and then silence. He could do that.

'Stomach,' he mumbled eventually.

Hannibal complied, raising his hand to rub tenderly along his stomach. And it felt nice. Will knew that. It felt warm, soft touches up to his nipples and down to his navel, along soft flesh. If he tried, he could pretend the contact was detached from the situation - forget who was doing it and *why.* The silence helped: with his eyes closed, and the slow pace of all these touches, his mind drifted off into lazy bliss and thoughtless peace.

After a few wordless, lavender scented minutes, Hannibal spoke:

'Would you like to sleep now?'

Will nodded, and Hannibal helped him up. He didn't even open his eyes; Hannibal propped him on the edge of the tub, quickly padded him with a towel, then guided him out of the bathroom and back into the bedroom, toward the bed.

Will untangled himself from Hannibal's arms and fell onto the mattress. Hannibal covered him, and Will blindly squirmed until he found a pillow where he could rest his head.

He felt the bed dip beside him, but there was only silence.

'Do you have to tie me up now?' he asked, eyes still closed, words muffled by the soft pillow.

'No, not now. Just sleep, love,' came Hannibal's response, followed by a shuffling of thread and feathers as the man leaned on the bed and his lips covered Will's, gently, chastely, before withdrawing, 'Goodnight, Will.'

Will hummed something, a wordless sound of no real intent, no real purpose. The controversy of relief and disappointment he felt as Hannibal left the bed collapsed under a white bubbling of exhaustion, and his thoughts flattened under the overwhelming current of sleep.

---

Will woke mercilessly.

That was the thing about sleep: it was vicious. It carried his unconscious mind into new mornings, and it left him there, confused and innocent, unprepared.

It felt to Will as if he'd fallen asleep midbreath, and had awaken to complete it.

But with new mornings came clear visions of sharper surroundings and bittered thoughts - the indulgence of the night was gone, and everything was seen under the scrutiny of sunlight.

Even before he dared open his eyes a movie of what happened was already rolling against the inner side of his eyelids, criticized by his sobered mind, ruthless and blunt in its depiction of Will.

He felt ashamed of himself.

He'd been so... passive.

Where was the blood? It was in blood that they both ended, it was in a swirl of copper red, shared between their skin, that they drowned; Hannibal fought with the fangs of monsters and the charm of Gods, and Will *needed* bruises, needed broken bones and distended muscles, needed proof of resistance.

He didn't know what this was.

He didn't know how to proceed.

He'd fight violence with violence, but Hannibal wasn't violent - rather, he was feather light kisses and loving glimpses, warm skin and pleas for acceptance, and such delicate things

*couldn't* be fought with violence.

But words didn't work either.

Will didn't know what to do.

But he'd chosen Jack. Hesitantly yes; with his own reserves, sure; but he'd made a choice nonetheless, and now Hannibal had taken it, and it wasn't *fair*.

He opened his eyes, eyelids unsticking slowly. Warm light flooded the bedroom. He frowned, squinting at the windows - they were closed.

He took time to understand it. Time to turn - almost fearfully - and find Hannibal besides the bedroom door, by the light switch.

He wanted to hide.

He wanted to *run*.

'Good morning, Will,' Hannibal greeted, soft smile lighting his elegant features.

He wore a dark brown suit. Irreprehensible. Above every standard of humanity.

His own scale. His own species.

Will watched with guarded eyes as Hannibal went around the bed so he could near Will. He sat at the edge of the bed, his body a inch away from Will's legs.

'I'm sorry I had to wake you so early,' the man went on, all light words and loving ease, and his hand went to settle on Will's hip - on his *hip* - and Will couldn't process it: the silent scream inside him burst, the confusion whirled to anger, and he jerked away.

'Don't touch me.'

He couldn't. He couldn't. Will didn't know why, but he couldn't.

Hannibal's smile snapped shut; surprise, then hurt, then bitter cautiousness. The most vulnerable widening of his eyes as he retraced his steps, wondering what had gone wrong.

'Will,' he tried, and his hand searched for his covered figure once more.

Will squirmed farther away.

His left foot was yanked back.

He sat with a jump and rumpled away the covers - his ankle was handcuffed to the bedpost. Furious, he glared at Hannibal, whose lips downturned in slight apology. But he'd moved closer to Will, and his breath was heavier, and his eyes were darkly scanning Will's newly exposed skin.

'Hand me some clothes,' he hissed, bunching the sheet back on top of him.

Hannibal didn't seem to hear him. Rather, he set his jaw and attempted to touch him again, this time going for his leg.

'What are you thin-'

'Get me some fucking clothes, Hannibal.'

The room went cold. Everything was cruel angles and dark shadows. The lamp light was too bright, the air thick and heavy. Will wondered what time it was, how long he'd slept.

Hannibal's hand flinched back. His mouth opened and closed. More surprise, more hurt - building up and up until it toppled over, and Hannibal's features went tight.

He stood up and handed Will a robe.

'Turn around.'

'After the events of last night, you still find yourself shy?' he could have said it with levity, aimed for humour, but there was too much pain in his eye - it clung to the words and made them sad, disappointed.

'I'm not shy, I just don't want you to look at me,' Will bit back, looking pointedly at Hannibal until the man turned with strict, tense movements. Will threw the robe on and slid down the bed to inspect the handcuffs, testing their strength.

'Take this thing off me,' he fumed, thrashing his foot so that the metal bit into his skin.

Hannibal looked at him dejectedly.

'Stop that, Will. You'll hurt yourself.'

'*I'll* hurt myself?' Wil laughed disbelievingly - what even was this? 'Hannibal, take this off me right now. Take this *off*.'

'I will, if you promise to calm yourself,' Hannibal was still standing beside the bed, hands clasped behind his back, solemn and contrite.

Will shook his foot in response, handcuffs jiggling in freezing metal clinks. He stared at Hannibal expectantly until the man relented and withdrew from his pocket a little key, unlocking the cuffs.

Will immediately jumped from the bed, a blur of white sheets flying in disarray, and lunged for the door.

He hit it, steps closing in from behind him, and clung frantically to the doorknob.

It swung - left, right - and didn't budge.

His head hit the door. The steps stopped inches behind him.

It was silent.

'You locked the door,' Will murmured.

'I didn't know what you would do,' came Hannibal's reply, just as soft.

'You thought I'd run.'

Will felt small - sleeping inside a little box, waking to find it sixty feet tall.

'I hoped you wouldn't.'

Was he all hope? A merciless murder, a psyche of insensitive decisions, converted to faith of feelings and tender reciprocations?

Happy endings neatly closing the bloodied chapters of their book.

'But you know why I had to,' Will dared not turn, dared not face him.

'You don't like being forced into decisions,' Hannibal closed their distance even further - Will could feel him looming over him, 'You cannot distinguish my will from yours.'

Will didn't answer. What could he say? Most likely, the words wouldn't belong to him anyway.

And then Hannibal was folding over him, arms looping round his waist, lips pressing into his nape, 'Come back to bed, sweetheart,' he pleaded, and Will *spun,* because his future was absolutely blank and white and meaningless, and he didn't know what to do but he knew how to *defy*, and he punched Hannibal.

Right in the jaw.

The most wonderful sound.

A divine arch of Hannibal's head as it was thrown backwards.

A punch to face a war.

'What did you think, Hannibal? That we were going to run off together? That I'd change my mind?'

Hannibal stumbled back up, composure returning to him fluidly.

His jaw was red. There was no blood.

Will wanted to cut into his skin.

'Yes,' Hannibal simply said.

'I made a *choice*!'

'You would have regretted it.'

Both their voices were raising: Will's in emotion, Hannibal's in cold and bite - the crescendo of a fight, the type of scene which leads to death.

'Yes, I would have, and I would have dwelled in my misery, Hannibal. *My* misery.'

'You'd prefer a heartache you created, than a joy another started?'

Will sighed. Pinched the bridge of his nose. Raked fingers through his hair, covered his face with his hands - an infinity of impatience, compacted energy leaking out.

'I have lived my entire life in others'minds. Who's to say I wouldn't be living in yours?'

Because Will feared it - he feared taking someone's feelings and mistaking them for his own, settling in another's dream for he thought it belonged to him.

Hannibal walked forth - in tune, Will backed away til his back hit the door.

'You might see me, Will, but my mind is one you cannot enter.'

And then Hannibal was close again, so close again, and the scene wasn't one of death but one of passion - climaxing with the swing of violins and the hit of ivory keys as Hannibal caged Will in, breaths mingling, eyes meeting, a storm between them both, endless lyrics by dead poets.

'I am the only person you will ever have the pleasure of not knowing.'

And with those words, spoken in a lover's murmur for they were its own love confession, its own bond between them two, all the anger washed away. There was only detachment - as if Will was helpless to  rebel against this current of events, a simple witness to them.

'What had you planned to happen?' Will murmured, eyes skittering lower, to Hannibal's tie.

'We'd have breakfast, and leave for a private flight I had arranged. I packed while you were asleep.'

Hannibal's hands trailed over Will's arms, his head ducking to press a kiss on the line where the silk of the robe met his shoulder.

'And now?'

'The same will happen.'

'Hannibal, I don't-' Will shook his head, looking up imploringly at him.

'I know, my love, and I won't make you endure it. You'll go back to sleep, and I'll take care of everything.'

And Will raised his eyebrows questioningly, and opened his mouth to ask, and then Hannibal's hand was moving, and there was a prickle of a needle, and a numbing of his body.

Sudden and overwhelming, like tripping into freezing water.

'What did you do?' he asked, and his words toppled terrified into the air, and his legs felt limp. Hannibal took him into his arms, held him close, and kept Will from collapsing.

'Don't worry, sweetheart,' he assured, pressing kisses to Will's curls, 'Be a good boy for me and sleep.'

'*Fuck*,' and Will did.

---

Drugs made for lime green dreams.

Like radioactive swirls etched into his eyelids.

Will woke.

Didn't feel like waking, though.

Felt like being underwater for very long, then swimming up. Just a little, not quite reaching the surface. Still water, only shallow.

He was in an airplane. Few seats, small space. A private thing - luxurious and fragrant and discreet. He took the seat by the window, and Hannibal sat to his right.

Will couldn't move. That was another thing. And he hadn't even tried it, or maybe he had but he was so unresponsive that the order hadn't even registered. He didn't know. In any case, he couldn't move. Thinking he could do, if he tried, but it wasn't automatic.

A conscious effort not to fall asleep again.

A conscious effort not to see it all lime green.

The world hadn't changed, however, Will knew that. Outside of his bubble - lazy and sticky, filled with honey - the world was active. Quick.

He was on a plane. Leaving his country.

He wondered what would happen to his dogs.

There was silence - he could stay silent; no fuss, no conflict. No answers either. He could speak - at least he thought he could. Speaking had always been troublesome for Will. His words weren't heard well.

'What time is it?' he uttered, and his voice sounded muffled, like his ears were covered in sponge.

Hannibal shifted beside him. The armrest between them had been lifted; not a barrier in sight. Will tried to turn his neck and get a better look at the man, but he couldn't: his head slumped, ear hitting his shoulder.

'Will, you're awake.'

'Yes.'

'Do you feel alright?'

'No.'

He heard a chuckle. Hannibal slid to the edge of the cream leather seat, twisting his body so he could look at Will's front.

With frustrating effort, Will tilted his head back. It felt like lead atop his neck. Immediately, Hannibal scanned his face, as if making sure everything was still in its proper place. Such a concerned look, a neurotic compulsion, was overwhelming for Will. He darted his gaze away, and swallowed drily.

'My question.'

'Ah, of course,' Hannibal smiled, all that loving lightness again returning to his features - like their fight had never happened, forgiven and forgotten. He settled a hand on Will's knee, 'We're between time zones, so I'm afraid I can't give you a precise answer.'

Will sighed. He felt the heat of Hannibal's skin against his; he felt the symbolism of the act as well - such a fight, such an argument, all beginning with Will's refusal to be touched. Now here they were. Everything circled back.

'How long did I sleep?' his questions were short words and simple thoughtlines. He focused on wiggling his fingers, which rested limply next to his thighs.

'Around nine hours. We left Baltimore at six in the morning.'

Will could move his hand now. It dragged itself an inch across the seat, then went pliant again. He felt incredibly proud of himself, because those were the battles he'd been reduced to - controlling his own body.

But Will wouldn't dwell over it, since a win was still a win, and every obstacle Hannibal placed primly in front of him, he'd beat.

That's how they danced. Stepping where the other had stepped.

'I'm wearing your clothes,' he observed with a frown. A navel shirt and light coloured slacks, everything slightly too big, slightly too soft to be his.

'That you are,' Hannibal agreed with a smile. He ran his hand up and down Will's leg, as if to feel the texture, but his eyes were too delighted for that. He wanted to touch Will. He had abstained, perhaps, for the progress of the trip, and now he *ached*, 'They suit you.'

Will snorted, 'Not my taste.'

Hannibal raised his hand to thread fingers through Will's curls. To Will's suspicion, Hannibal knew very well that his body wasn't yet functioning, and he was taking advantage of it.

'I imagine not. We'll buy you something more to your liking, when we land.'

The words brought Will to the world outside of that plane, outside of Baltimore, outside of America. He was somewhere else, above an ocean, toward something foreign.

'Where are we going?'

'Italy,' Hannibal responded, nothing short of blissful. His beloved country, and now with Will in it. Will saw it through his eyes, and it was paradise.

'Oh,' was all he managed to say.

Because it was heaven - for Hannibal. For Will it was grey land with grey people.

Silence settled between them. It was difficult to believe there was a pilot there, sharing their space, beyond a curtain and a door.

Hannibal's stare was still on him, and Will's was stubbornly on the window, overlooking the bouts of clouds.

'I missed you, while you were asleep,' Hannibal admitted softly, and Will knew he wished for Will's eyes to turn to him, for them to be shining with affection.

He couldn't give him that. He didn't answer.

'It is very difficult for me to be apart from you, Will. Both mentally and physically,' the man went on, all of him gentle, all of him love.

Will finally met his glance, a wry, ironic smile twitching in his lips.

'I'm all here.'

Wasn't that the truth?

Hannibal seemed to melt at the words.

'You are, my love. You are at last.'

And then Hannibal was surging forward, and Will braced for a kiss - but it didn't come; instead, he felt strong hands on his legs, on his back, and he was being lifted, positioned, manhandled onto his lap.

He couldn't even *try* to resist. His legs folded at each side of Hannibal's, his torso fell forward helplessly and Hannibal tenderly placed his head on his shoulder.

'What are you doing?' Will rasped, hands flexing weakly by his sides.

Hannibal's arms were looping around him, hands raking up and down his back.

'What would you like us to do?' Hannibal purred into Will's ear, kissing along his jawline. Will shuddered at the feel of teeth nipping at his skin, a hot tongue smoothing it over apologetically. He felt compacted between Hannibal's chest and hands, body overheating.

'We're on a *plane*' Will hissed against Hannibal's neck, able only to raise his head a few inches.

Hannibal hummed absent-mindedly. One of his hands withdrew from his back to nudge Will's head further up, so he could kiss his lips.

'How I've longed to have you like this in my arms,' he whispered hotly against Will's mouth, 'My beautiful, cunning boy.'

Will had opened his mouth to speak, but every word he'd meant to say tumbled off when he felt Hannibal's deft fingers unbuttoning his shirt.

'Hannibal, stop, for God's sake,' he wanted to stop him, wanted to bat his hand away, wanted to *move*, but he couldn't. He was there, mind foggy and body stone, for Hannibal to indulge in.

Hannibal's fingers splayed over his exposed skin, promptly moving to caress his stomach. Will whimpered.

'Shh, it's alright, sweetheart,' Hannibal cooed, his fingers moving agonizingly slow, soothing touches that left the suggestion for more, 'You love it when I touch you like this, don't you?'

Will pressed his lips together, muffling a moan. His hands were clinging to Hannibal's shirt now, trembling, fighting not to fall again.

'Tell me truthfully, love. I know you do, tell me,' Hannibal repeated, before sucking a small bruise on Will's throat.

'I don't... I don't want to,' if felt delectable, but he couldn't word it aloud, couldn't fling it into the world.

'But you do, darling. You love it so much. When in Italy, I'll draw you like this. So open for me, so overcome with pleasure.'

'Hannibal, stop that. Let me sit down,' Will urged, squirming slightly, just slightly.

'You are sitting, sweetheart,' Hannibal countered with a smirk, 'Tell me something else you like, one more thing.'

'Hannibal, *no*.'

'Yes, darling, just one more, I promise. Let me spoil you, my precious little boy.'

Will racked his mind looking for the appropriate response to this, but his mind was still muddled and now distracted by the constant stimuli of Hannibal's fingers and lips on his skin, and he had no clue what to say. Should he decline to answer, which was only to postpone the inevitable; should he lie; should he tell the truth?

In the end, he went for ambiguity.

'I don't know, Hannibal.'

'Come on, dearest, one thing.'

Will shook his head, buried in the crook of Hannibal's neck once more.

'What do you want, Will? My hand? My mouth?' Hannibal bit his earlobe, then sucked it into his mouth; 'Do you want to feel full?' he rocked his hips up, their crotches aligning perfectly, and Will moaned at the friction; the words were spoken so lowly, so seductively, charged with dark desire, and it only fueled Will's steadily growing erection.

'Not here,' Will pleaded, hating how Hannibal's hand, positioned strategically at his hip, fingers digging to form bruises on his flesh, was all it took to make sure Will rocked down against him, meeting his thrusts; he couldn't fight it, only capable of the smallest wiggling and tensing.

'It'll be fine, sweetheart,' Hannibal's other hand was still circling his stomach, that contact he *knew* Will liked, so devoted to providing Will pleasure.

'No, Hannibal, not now, later,' Will insisted, and he hated how that promise sounded in his own ears, but he had to say it - he hoped it'd appease Hannibal.

Hannibal *preened*, just how Will had predicted.

'You'd rather a bed, my love, somewhere soft to writhe on?' he murmured, voice overwhelmed by arousal, so in awe of finding Will's preferences, of knowing what he liked it.

Will nodded - *frantic* - because he was terrified of having sex like this, of being penetrated in this position. If it had to happen, he wanted it to be in a bed, somewhere normal, somewhere comfortable.

'But you'd look so pretty, my love. Can't you picture it, how beautiful you'd look riding me like a good boy?' Hannibal said, sounding so hopeful, so vulnerable in his own fantasy, thrusts more maddening as both their erections grew.

'Fuck, Hannibal, later, okay? I'll do it later,' and Will barely knew what he was saying anymore, desperate as he was to make Hannibal relent, and helpless to the friction against his dick and the dizzying loving touches on his stomach.

Will forced his head to hang high, to keep still on his neck, and looked pleadingly up at Hannibal; he looked back with widened eyes, seeming absolutely overjoyed, incredibly humbled.

'Will you truly?' he whispered, and Will knew how Hannibal must have been taking it - Will was offering to do something of his own initiative, something that involved much more participation on his part than the first time they'd had sex.

'Yes,' he answered shakily, 'Just not here, okay? On a bed.'

'Oh, sweetheart, of course, 'Hannibal pressed a myriad of kisses along his cheeks and throat, seeming *grateful*, 'Whatever my little boy needs.'

The words fluttered in Will's insides. He hated it, but there was some sort of visceral reaction to them. His mind recoiled from that condescending sweetness, yet he couldn't help but moan.

'Fuck, Hannibal, slow down. Slow down, please,' Will panted, hoping Hannibal would stay true to his pledge - whatever he needed.

With what seemed like an astounding measure of self-control, Hannibal halted his hips until there was only the smallest rocking between them, their erections rubbing together teasingly.

'There, my dear, is that better?'

Will nodded haphazardly, glance shifting between Hannibal's eyes - drowning in the deep maroon, made brighter with lust - and the rest of the plane, all light colours and luxurious peace.

He felt absolutely ridiculous, sitting on Hannibal's lap in there, flushed and rasping from a raging erection thousands of feet above land. Absolutely wrong, as he felt the hand Hannibal had been keeping on his stomach slither suggestively downwards.

'No, no, not now, Hannibal,' Will tried to twist his torso so his crotch was out of reach, but the order seemed to lose itself along his spinal cord, and he did nothing but move the slightest bit.

'We still have to take care of you, Will. You wouldn't want to be like this for the remainder of the flight, would you?' Hannibal said, tone so patient, so reasonable, like they were discussing trivialities. His large hand cupped Will's cock, stroking him through the fabric.

Will groaned, the firm pressure sending sparks up to his brain - fireworks tingling in his neck. His head dropped, forehead hitting Hannibal's, and the man took the opportunity to kiss Will thouroughly, pulling on his upper lip.

'So sweet, so lovely for me,' Hannibal whispered, seemingly to himself, and then his fingers were swiftly unbuttoning Will's slacks, and pulling Will's hard dick out with the utmost care.

'Hannibal, fuck, that's not *fair*, I can't even- I can't move,' Will said desperately, and the words seemed so meaningless, and the contact felt so *good*.

'And you don't have to, Will. I'll bring you to orgasm just like this, you won't have to move a muscle.'

Will whimpered, and Hannibal preened at the sounds, ducking his head to lap at Will's throat. The hand that wasn't holding his erection was still steadying his hip in a forceful grip, having now slid under Will's open shirt to dig nails directly into Will's hot, reddened flesh.

One last exertion, one last try - Will dragged his hand with small focused breaths, letting it fall on Hannibal's in an attempt to still it, to remove it from his erection; one last sign of objection, one last little rebellion to appease his conscience.

Hannibal only smiled, and seemed even more delighted. His hand withdrew for but a second, positioning Will's hand where his had been, carefully encircling his trembling fingers around the shaft. Then he covered Will's hand with his to keep it in place, so that they were both holding Will's dick.

'Oh, Will, sweetheart, touch yourself for me, show me what you like,' Hannibal begged into his ear, pressing just enough to make sure Will couldn't move his hand away.

Will could barely think. He couldn't do that for Hannibal, but it felt so unbelievably satisfying to have his own hand gripping his erection, and it felt like he was fighting his own muscle memory, his own experience that he'd gathered from so many hot, sweaty nights, and that yelled in his head for him to just *do it*.

He closed his eyes and stroked himself once, slowly and clumsily - the lingering effects of the drugs had robbed any sort of finesse from him - but overwhelmingly amazing all the same. He let out an embarassingly loud moan, breathing against Hannibal's mouth, which was slack with wonder.

'So pretty, my love, my perfect boy, bringing yourself pleasure. How does it feel, dear?' Hannibal cooed, his darkened gaze moving wildly from Will's hand to his eyes, as if he didn't know which one was more beautiful, as if he couldn't decide whether he wanted to see Will's eyelids flutter in pleasure - pleasure he'd *helped* create -, or his hand moving along his erection, touching himself for Hannibal.

'Fuck, *Hannnibal*,' Will mewled, and his hand moved of his own accord, he swore it did, so helpless to the sensation; his cock was leaking, and he wanted to grip himself tighter to bring himself to climax, but he simply *couldn't* - all he was capable of was loose strokes at an unnerving slow pace.

'Did you ever do this thinking of me, Will?' Hannibal asked, gaze piercing his, voice low and rough, demanding, 'Did you ever get to the edge picturing us together?'

Will tried to avoid Hannibal's stare though their eyes were level, with their foreheads still touching and their breaths entwining. He stroked himself again, suppressing a groan.

'No. Never.'

It was true, he thought. He wasn't sure. He'd thought about *thinking of* Hannibal, flashes of his skin and memories of his words emerging in his mind as he took care of himself in his bed, but those possibilities had been immediately stored away, out of reach.

'Who did you think of, then?' Hannibal urged, and Will could feel his muscles tensing beneath him, his hands gripping him harder - possessive, angry at the thought that Will could experience arousal to the image of anyone but him.

'Alana, mostly,' Will answered and somehow he wanted to *smile*, because he liked angering Hannibal like this, blatantly contradicting his belief that they had an uptight monogamy, a dark codependency where they couldn't even begin to yearn for someone else.

The thing Hannibal most wished in the world was for Will to confess he loved him. That was the only thing worth denying. The only way to win.

'Alana could never satisfy you, Will. She couldn't take care of you like I can,' Hannibal purred directly into his ear before biting it too hard, with too much teeth, 'I'm the only one that could ever sate you.'

Will shook his head. Hannibal's words had ignited in him a newfound rebellion, and he forced himself to stop stroking his erection.

'That's not true,' he hissed, because it didn't *have* to be.

'Of course it is, Will. Who else could make you so conflicted? Who else could bring you so much pleasure, even when you try to hide it?' Hannibal spoke with the threatening confidence that dares anyone to contradict him, like he wanted to hammer those words into Will's mind, to make him *believe* them, 'You are mine; my beautiful boy, and only mine.'

Will stayed silent, working through the waves of pleasure that Hannibal's skillful movements elicited from him; even not being able to touch his dick directly, seeing as Will's hand was still around it, he still managed to drive Will mad with the sensations.

'You've told me once before, sweetheart, why not tell me again? Let me hear it,' Hannibal coaxed, voice rough, wrecked with lust.

Will wondered if he should stay silent, if he should lie, if he should risk a truth he wasn't sure about anymore. He didn't know what to say, what to do. He was moaning uncontrollably, almost sobbing, and he hated everything - how he couldn't move nor fight, how it all felt so unfairly amazing, how he didn't know anything anymore.

And then, strangely, impossibly, he heard footsteps.

Footsteps.

And an utterly feminine, utterly *unknown* voice:

'I'm sorry to bother you, Mr Lecter,' it chirped out, tone smooth, unbothered, like this was entirely *normal* and Will couldn't even see this woman - this flight attendant, presumably - because she was behind him and he couldn't turn his neck. All he knew was there was a *woman* there, *seeing*, and he couldn't even imagine how he must look for her, slumped helplessly on Hannibal's lap, half undressed and moaning, rocking against him like some little twink, Hannibal's kept boy.

He'd never felt more embarassed in his life.

'Yes, Chiyoh?' Hannibal said, voice confident and unperturbed as well. Will wanted to hit him. He wanted to hit him and he wanted to run and he wanted to know why his hand *hadn't stopped moving*.

'Hannibal, stop,' he begged, voice lowered the most he could, cracking with the effort to suppress every little moan that Hannibal's deft strokes were eliciting.

'Shh, sweetheart,' Hannibal simply said, a devious smirk flashing on his lips before he pressed them sweetly against Will's curls, and he'd said it *loudly*, like he wanted Chiyoh to hear it - like he wanted Will to know she'd heard it -, and his strokes only quickened, making the slick sound of skin on skin reverberate through the air, and Will wanted to die.

'We've been notified that we won't get a discreet landing in Naples. The pilot recommends we land in Lamezia Terme.'

'Lamezia Terme isn't that far from Sapri, is it?' Hannibal asked; he had begun moving his thigh up and down so Will was softly bouncing and he'd never done that before, and Will knew it was for *show*. Still, the rocking sent even more pleasure to his weeping cock, and he had to bury his head in Hannibal's neck to muffle his sounds.

'No, it isn't,' Chiyoh said, all of her solemn and unwavering, the peak of professional indifference, 'With your permission, I'd like to radio our driver regarding the change of plans.'

'Of course, and please commend our esteemed pilot for his helpfulness,' Hannibal said, and the fact that Hannibal could speak such long and composed sentences while Will writhed there a quivering mess seemed completely unfair to him.

With relief he heard footsteps, a presumable sign that Chiyoh had left them alone once more, gone behind that curtain. He immediately raised his head to stare furiously at Hannibal.

'What the f-' he started, but then the man's mouth was on his, lips greedy and demanding, tongue attacking every inch of skin, fingers so tight around his hand and cock that it hurt.

'You did so well, Will, such a good, good boy holding all your noises for only me to hear,' Hannibal cooed, sickly sweet and impossibly aroused.

'Hannibal, I can't believe you- fuck, let me go right now,' Will fumed, trying so hard to shut off the overwhelmingly continuous flow of sensations Hannibal was providing him.

'No, you deserve a reward now, don't you?' Hannibal purred, not giving Will any relief, any leeway, building up his orgasm with unrelenting tugs.

Still, Will clung to the only shred of dignity he had, the only rational piece of him that told him to *move*. He found with hysterical glee that, whether because of a surge of adrenaline or from the drugs wearing off, he could move his right leg, and he tried to thrash it in order to dislodge himself; Hannibal simply placed it back with his free hand, not even batting a eye.

'I don't fucking *want it*,' he hissed, the smallest rebellion to ease his mind, even as his orgasm neared impossibly closer, morphing in his stomach, about to burst.

'But I must praise my little boy, mustn't I? Hannibal murmured hotly amidst open-mouthed kisses and strategic rocks of his hips, 'You deserve so much praise, Will, you deserve everything. Come for me, sweetheart, come in my lap for me to see.'

With a groan, Will came, cursing every strand of cum that came out of him, splattering on his and Hannibal's hand. His eyes closed and a broken moan escaped him, his back only not arching because his body was still numb. Hannibal kept stroking him patiently, milking every piece of cum from inside him until his dick was soft and aching.

For a few mindless minutes, Will was blissed with a couple of intermittent moments where there was no guilt, only pleasure. He panted into Hannibal's mouth, resting his forehead on his, thoughtless and peaceful, coming down from the white orgasmic high. Then, he felt Hannibal's hand withdraw from over his hand and cock. Hannibal gently encircled his wrist and lifted his hand, bringing it to his mouth and licking the cum off Will's fingers.

'So sweet, my love,' he praised with a playful yet entirely sincere smile.

'Will you let me sit now?' Will whispered bitterly, wanting more than anything to curl in on his own seat and regain some makeshift sense of privacy.

'No,' Hannibal hummed.

Will sighed. He hadn't expected anything else, really.

'Zip me up, then.'

No' he repeated, and he seemed to be enjoying his short replies.

'Hannibal, please,' Will begged.

'Just rest now, my love,' the man said, bringing his own, still cum covered hand to Will's stomach once more and rubbing it soothingly; he began moving his thigh up and down again, so Will bounced with it in a lazy and maddeningly slow rhythm: Will could feel his own cum sticking to his skin, and the tortuous burn of Hannibal's erection against his unclothed and soft dick; he'd never felt so small, laying in Hannibal's lap like this, spent and tired.

'Hannibal...' he whispered once the slow, languorous rocking began to edge into uncomfortable overstimulation.

'Shh, Will, you'll rest right here for me,' Hannibal closed his eyes, seeming absolutely blissful. He kept rubbing Will's stomach and making him bounce softly in his lap, not letting him move, speak or pull away one single inch until Chiyoh returned to tell them they were about to land.

Chapter End Notes

Hope ya all enjoyed it!~

As always, if you'd like to leave a suggestion I'd be happy to hear it - fluff, kinks, go crazy ;-) - and maybe I'll incorporate it in later chapters.

Bye for noww! <3

# Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Aaaaand we're back!~

Alright, notes!

Firstly: thanks to everyone that's read and kudo-ed and commented. I feel like you guys and I have this awesome compatibility of Hannigram and kinks, and that's, well, that's just true friendship <3

Secondly: my traditional •DISCLAIMER• remains. Come on, guys, we've built this together, we all know what it's about - dubious consent all the way! So if that's your trigger, or if it's become your trigger since you started the fic, I reaaaaally don't advise this.

Thirdly: everyone that's left their brilliaaaaant suggestions in the comments - do not fret, they await neatly in a document for me to write in later chapters! Almost every suggestion will be added, in some form or another, but I have to find a nice, clean moment to insert them in, so have patience!

Fourthly: as you might have assumed from the previous point, the story has been extended! It is now a plotted story that shall have multiple chapters. Sad consequence: chapters won't consist primarily of porn anymore. Happy consequence #1: more Hannigram character development. Happy consequence #2: still a looooot of porn ;-)

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a time where Will slept at night.

He'd go to sleep at an unreasonable time, toss and turn until sunrise, doze off a couple hours before the world went alive with colour again. And when he woke, his body woke with him, and there was a day ahead.

Will had gone to sleep so often now, and he didn't know whether it was night or day or anything at all; if dawn had become twilight or faded into white nothing. He woke to a room, then woke to a plane, now woke somewhere new, with no memory of between - flung into scenes with a handful of scripts from old plays, he mumbled words that seemed so inadequate, then watched as the curtain drew.

Blinking slowly, he took in his surroundings: a bedroom of white and teal, mostly unfurnished - the bed he laid in and a dresser made of light coloured wood under an opulent

silver mirror, a vase with a plant on it, limp branches tipping over and swaying with the evening breeze from the open window.

It was pretty. The linen curtains danced. The night sky was dark and clear.

He felt blurred.

Both in the sense of not being able to see - where was his vision? those black circles around his eyes had surely grown to shrink his sight - and in the sense of not being able to be *seen* - where was himself? he'd been left in Baltimore, in Hannibal's foyer, gripping his coat.

Will couldn't move. Again. He found he didn't care; what a ridiculous notion it would be to overpower Hannibal. His mind was neatly conserved, however, a bit rusted but with the light touch of something temporary, and his mind was the only thing that mattered.

He hoped Hannibal wouldn't eat it. He hoped his mind could be returned to nature, and rot peacefully by a river somewhere.

He cleared his throat with a groan. A stray curl was draped over his right eyebrow, covering half his eye. It itched his eyelid when he blinked.

He hated it.

He hated it and he hated Hannibal and Italy and its fucking clear skies.

He hated it all.

Time stretched on. Slow, scented by the breeze. They were by the ocean, Will could smell it. He wondered how far.

He wondered if he could kill Hannibal. He couldn't, but he wondered nonetheless. It was a nice thought.

And he wondered if he could keep resisting. If he could hold on long enough to escape.

The truth was he couldn't fight Hannibal. Not with muscle and bone - he could feign indifference, reinforce coldness, push back with words or tightened lips, but otherwise he had to wait. Until an opportunity presented itself, until the pieces fell before his mind to form a plan, or until he could convince Hannibal to free him of his own volition, Will was stuck.

It wasn't that bad. It wasn't hopeless. Will was good at waiting. And he was damn good at acting cold.

He glanced back at the door when he heard footsteps. Hannibal had probably been checking on him ridiculously often: like a child checking on their favourite toy, hovering beside it, fussing over its clothes.

Will debated whether he should pretend to be asleep: he didn't feel like talking, not when he was never heard. On the other side, he didn't feel like delaying the inevitable - it only left room for needless anticipation, a pool of worry for him to drown.

Thus, when Hannibal came into the room, Will stared with open eyes, placid gaze, blank face. Awake.

'Will, you're up.'

Hannibal was smiling. Always smiling, always pleased. Will remembered when the man didn't smile: they were friends then.

He had no clue what they were now.

'What time is it?' he asked, voice gruff.

Hannibal closed the door behind him, then came to stand by the foot of the bed. He wore dark grey cotton slacks and a black sweater. He'd never seemed more domestic - like they were playing house.

Will wished for the suits, the waistcoats, the ties to be back. Furthermore, he wished for a black top-hat, or horns, or a tail, so Hannibal could be *wrong* and not unbearably soft; so everything could be simple in black and white.

'Nearly midnight,' Hannibal answered with a glance at the cut-out of the night sky through the window, 'How are you feeling?'

'I feel drugged.'

It was the easiest feeling to identify; the easiest to admit.

Hannibal nodded with the most unusual expression of compassion - and how could he not be lying?, Will thought, this psychopath so openly worried - and gingerly stepped forward, inching himself closer to Will's paralyzed form. It annoyed him, how Hannibal could skitter so unpredictably between confident possessiveness and newlywed hesitance; he should pick one, give him at least enough cohesion for Will to be able to adapt.

'The effects should wane soon enough,' his tone was the reassuring tone of doctors; he sat on the edge of the bed, hands on his lap.

Will frowned, 'I guess I'll go back to sleep, then,' he said, and if he could have, he would have turned his back.

'I think that would be for the best,' Hannibal agreed promptly, smoothing his hand along the expanse of Will's right arm through the white sheet, a chaste show of affection, 'You must be very tired.'

'I am,' Will breathed out, certain that his tone carried enough finality to discourage the conversation. He looked up at Hannibal pointedly, careful not to let his humiliation show, the way his cheeks threatened to fire up at the thought that he was neatly tucked in - that *Hannibal* had tucked him in - like a child. After a moment, Hannibal seemed to receive the message and his posture straightened.

'I'll go prepare us some food. You should eat something,' he said as he unfolded, not leaving but instead standing with a reluctant tension in his muscles.

Will sighed.

'Hannibal.'

'Yes?' those maroon eyes pierced him so intensely, so hungry for Will's voice.

'Would you please take the hair out of my eyes?'

Perhaps he'd regret asking, but truly it was such a small thing, and it itched and he just wanted it *gone*.

Hannibal's face lit with fondness, with that insufferably proud glow he got whenever he got to help Will.

'Of course, my love.'

And Hannibal sat down again, which was completely unnecessary, and gently brushed the stubborn curl up. His hand lingered then, trailed down to Will's cheek. His previous restraint was gone; he was yearning touches now.

Will didn't care. The itch was gone: it counted as a win to him.

'Is that better?' he whispered, thumb ghosting along Will's cheekbone.

'Yes,' Will said, and then, because he could never forget the antlers lurking dark and looming over the man's head, he added, 'Thank you.'

Hannibal smiled, and ducked down to press a brief kiss to Will's lips.

'Sleep, my sweet boy. I'll wake you when the food is ready.'

Will pressed his lips together in a subtle attempt at keeping the kiss innocent. Hannibal got up again, looked him over once more with that religious gleam of sheer wonder, then said, as if in an after-thought:

'I have a surprise for you, when you come down.'

Will arched an eyebrow, but Hannibal didn't elaborate; he left with a self-satisfied smirk, and Will heard his footsteps slowly fade away.

The curtains were still doing their fluid twirls, white linen blown by the breeze. Will let them carry him into an easy trance, picturing that he was outside, walking steadily away from that house, from Hannibal, from their self-destructive situation of toxic symbiosis. He imagined that with each step a string went loose from his head, another thread slithering out until he was perfectly unattached and free.

It felt almost real; that was the talent of Will's mind. It was almost his own bed, it was almost his house.

He might have dozed off, but he wasn't sure. He might have dreamt, but they could have just been regular thoughts. With his body numb, and absolutely nothing to do, being awake was just a more boring alternative to being asleep. One hour passed - maybe two, maybe three years, maybe four minutes - until his limbs felt his own again. He scratched the side of his face, then his eyebrow where that tangle of hair had been for so long, and the simple act seemed incredibly precious.

It was stupid. He'd moved for thirty four years; now, he felt thankful for it.

Eventually he decided to stand up. It hurt, like his skin had withered, his muscles atrophied – he felt shrunken, exhausted, stumbling next to that muddled edge that separates humans from the spiritually redeeming sleep of the comatose; were he to just collapse, faint with his cheek on the gelid wooden floor, and his soul would come out at last from his cadaverous person, and perhaps then he'd be free of Hannibal Lecter and the web of death they'd both spun.

But Will was resilient. Even when he craved defeat, his flesh held on, his bones crunched tight, his feet dug into the floor. He stood in that unknown bedroom, and he didn't fall.

He wore the same clothes he had on the plane; just the subtlest shade of crumpled, those feeble folds and creases that bothered only people like Hannibal. A good excuse to keep them on. Will would make sure he was forever short of the perfect dream Hannibal had conjured of him; just a tad too crooked, his skin too pale, his gaze too dead. Let his prospects be frustrated: Will would never accommodate them.

With awkward steps he approached the window, placing his forearms on the smooth stone of the ledge. The shutters were open wide, the picturesque elegance of meadows stretching before them – unleashed under the darkness of the heavens, tall grass and bouts of sand, herbaceous bushes ruffled through the nocturnal breeze.

Yes. Italy was beautiful.

He could see himself dying contently there.

Were his last breath to blend with the watered fragrance of the Italian coast, and he'd count himself fortunate.

No one would know him there, at least. He could bleed out on the streets and appear on the news under foreign words he wouldn't have known how to read, stored as a sad traveler, and no one would understand. A murder so full of love – Hannibal would make it so, make the blade cut through him like a goodbye kiss – but in death he'd have the insignificance he had always craved.

He closed the shutters. The curtains ceased their dance; solemn veils hung mournful and untouched.

He preferred them like that.

Will left the bedroom and entered an ample corridor: his room was at the end of it, three doors were spaced evenly on the wall to his right, and the wall opposite to him gave room to a floor-to-ceiling glass panel that showcased the night in its cold and treacherous endlessness, almost as if the darkness was a creature of its own, prepared to swallow him whole, and the glass stood there a martyr to keep it out.

One of the doors opened to a bathroom. The others were closed, and the plan to seek them out was fleeting – Will was too exhausted, and he'd need to save his strength, as well as his resolve, for the stairwell to his left.

As he descended from the top floor livelier sounds made way into his ear – gone were the crickets and cicadas, the crackle of wind gusts on the wall, replaced by the soft bounces of an opera piece and the tuned complement of Hannibal's hums, devoted but diligent as he worked amidst a set of metal clanking.

It was an open plan. Modern house, ample space and whatnot; this is to say, when Will reached the last step, clenching his teeth to muffle out a current of pants, there were no walls to conceal him, and Hannibal, through the line of counters that separated the kitchen from the living room, saw him that same second, like he'd been programmed to do so.

In the amused thoughts of atheists, Will reckoned he could have been.

'Will,' Hannibal exclaimed in surprise, cleaning his hands on his apron, 'Are you alright?'

Will nodded. He could see himself: he looked sick.

Hannibal saw it too, and hurried to him.

'You should have waited for me,' he said, disapproval and worry lacing his voice. One of his arms looped around Will's waist, and he coaxed him carefully onward, past the living room and the kitchen, into a small space with a dining table.

Will was propped onto a chair. He placed his elbows on the surface and hid his face with his hands.

'I told you I'd come help you down when the food was done,' Hannibal went on, so annoyingly put upon, like a father who'd been disobeyed.

Will let out a sardonic huff at the notion: from where had Hannibal summoned this illusion of authority, of perverse caretaker?

'I was bored,' he shrugged, feigning disinterest, though his heartbeat was rabbit quick and there was a wicked urge within him to lay his head on the table.

Hannibal bristled; his hands came to press on Will's shoulders, then retreated. He looked critically at him, one silver blond eyebrow arched, and he would have been the picture of professionalism were it not for the obviously intimate weight of his gaze.

'You should be more cautious regarding your own health, Will. You're clearly in no condition to walk.'

Will uncovered his face, staring disbelievingly up at Hannibal.

‘You drugged me *twice* today. I’m not the one neglecting my health.’

‘Would you have come peacefully had I not drugged you?’

And Hannibal had the nerve to seem vexed; the audacity to look as if Will’s impending response was something to be *ashamed* of.

Will wanted to stand. Stand and argue like violent men were supposed to argue, because Hannibal made him a violent man.

‘You know I wouldn’t have. I would have screamed myself hoarse.’

He poured as much bitterness into the words as he could. He meant it. This wasn’t a romance, this wasn’t normal – Hannibal wasn’t a host, and Will wasn’t a guest.

Hannibal’s features went tight, sharp cheekbones casting shadows on his face. How outrageous of him to look so often wounded by the same heartbreak.

‘You run in circles, Will. Running from me is running toward me.’

Will smiled coldly.

‘Well, it’s the thought that counts.’

Each word was a brick between them, and Will rejoiced in the wall he’d built. There was his strategy, there was his angle: Hannibal could pretend to be as special as he wanted, but when it came to rejection his tolerance was the same as any other man’s.

Hannibal breathed, nostrils flaring slightly. A silence settled between them as he thought of a response.

‘The doses I gave you were perfectly safe. You should be feeling better soon,’ he said eventually: distanced, mechanic, and he turned his back and left.

Will felt proud. Resting back against the chair, his expression was nothing short of smug. He’d hurt Hannibal, and power came with that – that man-made power that rushes through one’s veins when one tears up a page of the bible, a depiction of God. The most dispassionate disrespect for sanctity – or, in Hannibal’s case, profanity, which was worse in its own way; only a soul of supreme good or transcendent ruthlessness can supersede evil, and Will had never been good.

He didn’t dare stand up once more. There was nothing else to accomplish that night, nothing else to explore. He was done. He deserved rest. He’d eat whatever food Hannibal gave him, ask – in the recklessness of a tired tongue – what he wanted, then sleep.

He sunk lower into the chair, chin touching his chest in a lazy posture. He liked his plan.

Hannibal eventually returned to set two places on the table, his to the right of Will's, who sat at the end of it. Will dutifully refused to help. When he came back with two plates of food, beguiling in its simplicity, Will refrained from raising his gaze to exhibit the faintest sign of approval.

'What is it?'

Hannibal sat down, grabbing his fork and knife.

'Chicken.'

Will arched an eyebrow skeptically.

'The kind that has a name?'

'No, I'd imagine not,' Hannibal answered calmly, a hint of shy amusement in his eye, like he feared to translate it onto smile on account of their previous tension.

It suited Will just fine. He didn't want to amuse Hannibal. It reminded him of lost evenings, deceitful sessions, where they'd spoken like friends and Will had complimented his food with uncomplicated admiration.

Will ate. It was a humble chicken breast with pesto – fresh basil, vibrant and perfumed – and legumes. It was clear that Hannibal had had little time to prepare the meal, as well as a short range of ingredients. It still tasted delicious. Of course it did, because that was Hannibal's brand: whatever he did, he did well.

Hannibal's demeanor was impassive. The kind of impassive that one fabricates and posts on their skin to hide the turmoil within; the kind of impassive that echoes in the room and orders everyone else to be quiet.

They cleared their plates in isolating introspection. Hannibal got up to take the plates to the kitchen, and returned then with a softer look, an open regret that hoped to redeem the evening.

'I mentioned a surprise.'

He had. Will feared any surprise Hannibal could offer.

'Is it good or bad?' he asked cautiously.

'Good, I think. Shall I go get it for you?'

Again, Will shrugged, 'If you want to.'

Hannibal smiled, then disappeared further into the house. Will gave up on following him with his gaze – he was too tired for anticipation, and too disenchanted for hope.

And then there was a noise. A small noise, and under the beautiful skies of Italy – those fucking skies – and in that beautiful coastal home – that fucking house, the fucking coast – it

was the warmest thing he could imagine.

Paws on the floor.

He heard the run before he could see it; the little paws sliding on the polished wooden boards. And fur, and a body, and a dog, Winston, there, in that fucking house, coast, Italy, all of him Baltimore and old and *safe*, and he was there, and Will dropped on the floor, and Winston was in his arms.

'Hi, boy,' he greeted, a wide smile overtaking him as Winston licked his cheek. He felt alight with brimming excitement, the most innocent happiness of lost things being found anew.

And from a distance Hannibal looked on, arms crossed, incredibly pleased and *fond*.

'He was on the plane?' Will asked, tone lowered to an incredulous whisper, looking up at the other man.

'I fetched him after you went to sleep yesterday,' Hannibal nodded, looking distinctively proud of himself, 'Was it a good surprise?'

And Will wouldn't lie. Because there were good things, and then there were things like this.

'Yes. Thank you, Hannibal.'

Hannibal's face, which had been reserved since their cold exchange a few moments ago, now brightened with relief.

'I'm very glad you enjoyed it.'

Will smiled in polite response, then returned his undivided attention to Winston, scratching his ear while he twisted and moved to brush himself against Will.

Hannibal didn't leave, which was mildly annoying. Will didn't know if the man expected Will to say something else to him, or if he was simply content with watching him pet his dog. In any sense, he didn't care. He remained crouched on the floor, smiling at Winston and rubbing along his flank until his legs began to tremble and Winston settled at his feet.

'I suspect it'd be better if you both got some sleep,' Hannibal spoke, equal parts amusement and worry.

'I think so too,' Will relented, grabbing the edge of the table to help hoist himself up. His legs wobbled. His head rushed up and down, a heat along his forehead.

'Come, I'll help you to your bedroom,' and Hannibal was already looping his arms around him, and it was the most disturbing habit now, this support to his debilitated state, and what could he feel when the support and the venom came of the same person? What could he choose, when the venom helped him up the stairs and into his room, tender and treacherous?

The bed felt delectable. Will wanted to drown in it, to morph into the mattress so he was threads and feathers.

‘Will you let Winston stay here with me?’

‘Of course,’ Hannibal agreed, ‘He is your dog, Will, he sleeps wherever you want him to sleep.’

And it was such a painful illusion of control – the privilege of inconsequential decisions inside his own helplessness.

Still, he was grateful. He managed half a smile, and sat on the edge of the bed, Winston coming to nuzzle at his knee.

‘I took the liberty of choosing some clothes for you,’ Hannibal continued, ‘They’d be more comfortable for a night’s rest.’

Will looked at the dresser and nodded. He didn’t like the way Hannibal hovered at the threshold, like he hoped to stay. He wanted him gone.

‘Well, good night then.’

There was the briefest moment of disappointment; then, Hannibal composed himself.

‘Good night, Will.’

He closed the door – the most wonderful sight – and then came the metallic clink of a lock. Will sighed; he didn’t really expect anything else.

There was a small comfort in locked doors. He couldn’t get out, and nothing could get in.

Of course, he considered the window for a moment. But it was a top floor, and the ceilings were high – he didn’t see any bright prospects in limping his way through a sandy meadow with a broken leg.

In a way, he felt relieved. There was no discernible option, no valiant course of action. He felt justified in sleeping. And so, he changed into the sinfully soft clothes Hannibal had neatly folded for him, switched off the lights and curled under the covers, Winston pressed against his body with soft pants and nudges, a warm token of older moments in Wolftrap, where the night was dark and the fog was the sea – and like endless nights before, the waves carried him to sleep.

---

There was a thoughtful peace to the next day.

Will had woken late. Had kept the shutters closed as he left the bedroom.

They had brunch. Hannibal showed him around. The house was cozy. Perfect. A dream of escape turned real – the house people summon when overwhelmed. A retreat, and now a

hospice for broken souls.

He wasn't in jail – it felt so vain to call himself trapped. There was freedom all around, a tease through glass panels, but unreachable: Will saw, at any doubtful moment, Hannibal's stern face and strong arms, unbothered as he dragged him back. He was sure it would happen, and he feared the hopelessness that would come when it turned true. It was a weak shadow, the construct of power Will nursed in his hands, and he was scared that the breeze would blow it away.

Winston seemed content as ever. He yapped and yelped and pawed at the furniture, provoking small, muted sighs from Hannibal. The two men barely talked, Will curled on one end of the sofa, staring blankly at the wall with the safe pretext of a book to conceal his face, and Hannibal busying around the house with that thorough pace of him, that sharp gaze as he cleaned and dusted and arranged – fussed over flowers and looked reprovingly at the fridge – moving in a blur of nameless tasks.

They ate dinner. Hannibal asked if Will was enjoying the food, to which Will nodded. He then went out on a long rant of the obstacles he found in making some decent courses with such an average set of ingredients. Will never looked up from his plate. To the length of Hannibal's words, he responded with a huff.

The sun set, Will watching the shades of blue blend together from his spot on the couch. He let out a deep breath and stood up – there was too much glass on the ground floor, too many windows to remind him of how deserted they were, how unknown the landscape was. He planned to hole up in his bedroom, perhaps persuade Winston to lay next to him for a nap, and hopefully fall asleep before Hannibal had the nerve to approach him with some new attempt at conversation.

He never made it to the bedroom. Halfway up the stairs, Hannibal reappeared from the kitchen, where he'd been cleaning the dishes, and spoke:

'Are you turning in for the night already?'

'I planned to,' was Will's short response.

'What a shame. I hoped you'd join me for a short walk.'

And Will's ears perked, and Will's spirits lifted.

But it was too good to be true. It had to be.

'Why?' he asked carefully.

Hannibal did the poised equivalent of shrugging, which was a slight twitching of his lips.

'The night seems pleasant.'

Will rolled his eyes at that.

'You don't care about the *night,* Hannibal.'

And there was that proud smirk, the little expression Hannibal reserved for him and only him – telling him he was right, telling him he had *seen*.

‘ I must admit nocturnal walks are often more enjoyable when paired with a stimulating chat.’

It was rather clever, wasn’t it? Will couldn’t say no to that: the zone of steadfast logic in his brain overruled his stubbornness, ordered to swallow the rebel words and *go the fuck outside*.

‘Fresh air and conversation?’ he scorned.

‘Precisely,’ Hannibal smiled, unbothered by his tone – and he had won, and he had every right in smiling.

Will sighed loudly, one of his hands coming to rub at his forehead. Winston promptly poked his knee, innocent worry in those lovely chestnut eyes.

‘Why the hell not?’ he said at last, and it felt so much like, as he descended those steps toward Hannibal, he was abandoning all chances of comfort and safeness; down he went to the cruel beast’s talons, down he went to stroll beside it.

But it was fine, because it had a reason, and reasons – excuses, kept in such moral self-assurance in his head – made him sane. Reasons saved him from wondering what he was doing: he would go, and endure the walk, the venomous repartee, to scout the landscape around them.

‘Follow me, then,’ Hannibal’s tone was courteous and, true to his word, he led them to the front door of the house, fetching a key from his pocket to unlock it.

‘Winston’s coming with us,’ Will demanded in a rushed breath.

‘He is?’ Hannibal’s eyebrows raised.

‘He needs the fresh air too.'

‘That seems like a reasonable request,’ Hannibal nodded after only the shortest pause, but Will saw in it the smoothed over contempt at this dog that was sharing Will’s attention, that was blessed with his love.

They stepped out into the sandy plains, contours of grass thin and delicate against the immensity of the dark sky – it stretched, and stretched, up over their heads and behind them, back over to unfurl everlong to where their sight couldn’t reach. The ground was small and meek, a haven for small creatures that sung and cracked between the shadows, and above was the world of colossuses and monsters.

Winston broke out running through the grass, set out to explore a small dune before them. Will and Hannibal walked at a more leisurely pace, side by side.

‘The landscape in Italy is of a peace I seldom witness anywhere else,’ Hannibal broke the silence after a few steps, head turned just the smallest bit, enough to spy at Will through the

corner of his eye.

‘It’s nice,’ Will agreed, gaze dutifully resting on Winston’s ever-shifting form.

‘The sky is clearer,’ Hannibal’s fingers wandered, grazing Will’s own; Will crossed his arms, ‘I would risk suggesting Italy is the owner of its own sky, one it does not share with anywhere else.’

‘It’s the same sky, Hannibal,’ Will retorted bluntly, because the world *was* the same – the ground, the sky, the humans – wherever they chose to be. Nothing changed.

Hannibal looked over at him fully; desperate to avoid the stare, Will crooked his neck, peeking over his shoulder - the house, all wood and glass, shrunk a little with each step, covered in black pencil and charcoal.

'It could be,' came Hannibal's words, so soft in the breeze, 'A different sky for you and I.'

Will shook his head, gaze downcast, clung to the shadowed blades of grass.

'It's the same sky, Hannibal. Changing the angle at which you look at it means nothing.'

'Under all these stars, do you not yearn for change?'

'I was happy!' and now Will was staring straight at Hannibal, at that viscous maroon that bent and broke to its will, because Hannibal was so confident of the benefits of their exile, so sure he'd made the right decision, but Will didn't care - he craved the comfort of his own decision, sound in ethics and deaf in excitement, irrelevant somewhere in Wolftrap, a serene wait until death.

'You were not happy, Will,' Hannibal said, like if he said it passionately enough the words would sink in Will's mind, 'Your happiness is conditioned by me.'

'Because you made it so.'

'Because I showed you.'

'Well, I don't need to be happy,' the wind whipped Will's face, and he hugged his torso tighter, a shield against the sudden cold and the now overwhelming indifferent infinity of the sky beyond them, 'All I wanted was not to hurt anyone. It's all I wanted my whole life.'

'I have not asked you to hurt anyone,' Hannibal's tone was low, compelling. He took a step closer to Will's, and Will retreated with a sharp look.

'What else would happen, in a life with you?'

'The potential for enlightenment. The truth of self-expression,' Hannibal's face had sunk into cutting edges and shadowed glints, a dark intensity thickening his accent, 'I have seen you, Will, my love, and you should not be hidden from the world.'

Will scoffed. He wanted to cry. To sob amidst the grass.

'I know what happens when people like me express themselves.'

And there was Hannibal stepping closer again: always dancing, always pursuing. He was part of the dark sky; his pupils were stars.

‘You and I are monsters, Will, and we deserve our place on this earth the same as anyone else.’

‘No,’ Will shook his head, ‘I’m not a monster, Hannibal. I’ve got *urges*.’

Urges of blood; urges of pretty teeth in the cracks of the floorboards; urges of skin in his nails.

But he wasn’t a monster. He *tried*.

‘It doesn’t matter. We share a nature; repressing it isn’t brave – it’s fearful.’

Antlers on Hannibal’s head, and if Will cracked that skull against the ground, would the scream echo that of a stag or a human?

‘You’re wrong,’ – he had to be, had to; Will was brave, Will was *right* - ‘This is all bullshit! You can’t brainwash me into becoming your partner in crime.’

Silence fell. A gust of wind ruffled Hannibal’s hair, the smallest inch of disarray. His jaw was clenched, breaths slow, gaze turned to stare at the extent of grass and sand beyond them.

Will sighed. When he spoke again, his voice was softer:

‘I thought you’d murder me. I thought you’d torture me. Never thought you’d abduct me.’

Hannibal huffed, the subtlest trace of humor.

‘How could I murder you, Will? You’re the loveliest thing that’s ever lived.’

Will rolled his eyes.

‘And you enjoy collecting lovely things.’

Wasn’t he another element of Hannibal’s aesthetic – a suit to be worn, a bottle of wine to be admired, a course to be consumed?

‘I’m not *collecting* you. I’m striving to keep you,’ Hannibal corrected, tone hushed, ‘You would have left, Will.’

Will stared dejectedly at the stars. They were more than in Wolftrap - brighter too, endless white dots on a black canvas.

Perhaps Hannibal was right. Perhaps the sky was different.

‘Not necessarily. I would have chosen whoever won.’

‘Can’t you consider this me winning?’ Hannibal seemed curious, seemed *urgent*, too much care laced between each word. He wanted Will leashed by this slave love he had; he wanted a peaceful start of a shared existence, a mutual statement of truce. He’d shot a film in his head, had done his part in the perfect performance of desperate love, and hoped now for Will to read his lines.

But Will had his own film in mind. He’d seen a showdown of broken bones and settled dust, a crown of thickets to the one still breathing, and him – without choice, without worry – free to follow the victor with no regrets.

Hannibal had taken him that.

‘You didn’t win, Hannibal. You ran.’

And Hannibal’s face was pure hurt, and Will didn’t care.

‘I’m going back inside,’ Will turned his back, beckoned Winston to follow, and trailed back to the house, hands in his pocket, gaze stubborn on the ground.

What a fool he’d been. Of course the sky was the same. And he’d make sure he’d see it from Baltimore again.

---

He thought it was Winston.

Well, he didn't think it: he *hoped* it.

But that tongue moved with purpose down his neck, too hot, too driven, and the body straddling him weighed too much, stretched too far.

It was the dead of night, and Hannibal was attached to his throat.

'What the fuck are you doing?'

The tongue retreated and a row of teeth took its place, nibbling on the heated spot of skin. Will struggled to move - his torso was crushed beneath the man.

'Be still, Will,' was Hannibal's simple response, and his voice was already pitched low, already too rough - too *lustful* - and Will had no clue *why*.

'Hannibal, get the fuck off me.'

'Hush, darling,' Hannibal laid a trail of kisses down to his collarbone, lips pressing insistently on his skin.

Will's mind was spinning - it had woken seconds ago and immediately it was assaulted by this cacophony of feelings, this shortness of breath, this conflict between body and mind.

It was *unfair*. And he flung his arms up haphazardly, set on pushing Hannibal away, but it lacked any real strength - his muscles still numb, still asleep -, and Hannibal smoothly pinned his hands above his head, pressing them down firmly against the pillow.

'*Stop*,' he half-yelled. The shutters were partly opened, filtering in enough moonlight for it to shade white lines on everything, allowing Will to see, bathed in the hazy clearness, the contours of Hannibal's chest, bare, as well as his own.

He'd gone to sleep in a t-shirt. He suspected it laid now on the floor, discarded impatiently by Hannibal.

He chastised himself for not waking up sooner.

'I couldn't help but feel regretful over our late conversation,' Hannibal murmured, lifting his head just for a moment to look at Will more seriously, truthfully repentant; then, his eyes darkened further with want, with need, 'I felt I needed to apologize.'

The hand that wasn't pinning Will's down raked eagerly along the side of Will's squirming chest, fingers catching on the ridge of each rib.

'This is a fucking shitty apology,' Will spat out, trying now to trash his legs. It had little effect - they were trapped uselessly between Hannibal's, capable only of ruffling the sheets.

Just like that, the powerlessness was back. The same desperate knot he'd had within him that first night, when he was so close to escaping Hannibal; and later on the plane, drugged in Hannibal's lap - there was an added fragility to sex, open windows for humiliation.

'I rather think not,' Hannibal was now smirking, face hovering just over Will's sternum, 'You seemed very forgiving when you were asleep, didn't you, sweetheart? Moaning so prettily each time I touched you,' he pinched Will's right nipple, 'each time I kissed you,' his lips sealed around the left one, so both Will's nipples were simultaneously stimulated.

And Will knew it was true. He could feel it now - his skin felt flushed, and his nipples had peaked reddened and swollen long before he'd woken. Hannibal had been methodically pushing buttons when Will was helpless to conceal their effect.

How receptive had he been, without a conscience to stop him?

The thought made him flush even further, anger and embarrassment bubbling with heated fumes in his head.

'We've been through this, Hannibal,' Will tried, struggling to keep himself leveled, 'If you have any respect for me, any at *all*, then please just stop.'

While his fingers doubled down on their pinching and teasing of Will's right nipple, Hannibal's lips relinquished his left one in favour of speaking:

'You know I respect you more than anyone else, my dear,' he said, intoned in the lyricism of a poem. But Will didn't believe him - poets always lie - because he didn't step away from Will, didn't stop pressing their bodies together so Will was no longer crushed under him, didn't give him any choice before defiling him.

Will could feel a layer of sweat sticking to his skin; he could feel fire in the parts of his body that were smothered by Hannibal. And he could feel the beginnings of an erection that had been groomed in his sleep, straining against Hannibal's thigh.

'I swear to God, Hannibal, if you do this I won't talk to you ever again.'

'Shh, Will, no use in getting worked up over nothing,' Hannibal countered with a pat to his chest, and that deaf condescension made Will want to rip his hair out. So Will fought wildly against Hannibal's grip, raw fury inciting him, body convulsing over Hannibal's unmoving figure.

'Sweetheart, settle down.'

'Stop calling me that,' Will hissed, not relenting on his efforts.

Hannibal sighed, his broad chest heaving under the soft shades of the moonlight. He seemed only mildly inconvenienced at Will's resistance, as confident in its unimportance as he always was. Will thought it strange, how Hannibal's surety came when he could see Will bare like this; he seemed much more vulnerable when they were simply talking.

He fed on Will's discomfort, in the end. When Will could be cold and sharp, darkly cruel, Hannibal retreated; but when Will was like this, when his defenses were down and he was exposed fully, Hannibal flourished.

Will was still thrashing when Hannibal's free arm lifted off his body to search blindly for something at the end of the bed - the man's new position, leaned back as he was to better reach whatever he was looking for, applied firmer pressure on Will's partial erection, making it throb in uncontrolled excitement.

'For fuck's sake, get *off*-' Will was saying, but his words died out as Hannibal's free hand came to view once more, holding a pair of handcuffs.

'I hoped we wouldn't find use for this,' Hannibal offered in faux apology, but he seemed the opposite of rueful as he clicked the handcuffs shut around Will's wrists, looping the chain to the headboard - he observed them with a wanton stare, one finger trailing through the line where metal met skin.

'Hannibal, fuck, *no*,' Will pleaded, hating the way his voice cracked; he could hardly breathe, and he tried to buck his hips to throw Hannibal off him, but Hannibal only rocked down against him deviously, 'What does this even do for you? What's the point of this?'

Hannibal ghosted his fingers over the expanse of Will's arms, appreciating the soft flesh of the now useless limbs. It felt like mockery, even despite the adoring glint in his eyes.

He was trapped. Again. Always helpless before Hannibal, one way or another.

'It's so much easier to reach you like this, Will. When you bare to me your skin, so too is your soul exposed,' Hannibal replied with a wistful tone, a breath of serene contentment, unhurried in his touches now that Will had no means of escape. The pads of his fingers slithered from his arms down the slopes of his clavicles and around his stomach, lovingly tender, infuriatingly slow, 'Besides, you're neglecting a very simple reason, Will,' he added, voice pitched lower, more seductive, 'Can you not believe that I feel sexual desire towards you?'

Will huffed, trying to shut off the unwilling effects of Hannibal's touches.

'I find it hard to believe that that's why you're doing this.'

'I assure you,' Hannibal smirked, 'that it's an overwhelming factor.'

And then Hannibal was dipping his head and sucking the skin just atop his navel, hands finding his hips and gripping them.

Will stared at the ceiling. Perhaps if he prayed - if he closed his eyes hard enough and promised to live a better life -, God would swoop down his cold heavens and save him.

'You've bruised so well for me,' Hannibal cooed as he poked at the various shades of left and purple he'd left on Will's skin, pulling the waistband of his pants down to reveal more, 'Such a good boy, all marked up.'

Will barely flinched as Hannibal removed his pants completely. Once more, he wedged himself between them, the thin layer of Hannibal's own pants the only barrier between their cocks, Hannibal's rock hard and Will's slowly getting there. Will gazed blankly at Hannibal's crotch for a moment,  at the size of the bulge there. He could barely believe he'd fit it in his own body not long ago. It felt like a dream. A memory by someone else.

'Are you getting eager, Will?' Hannibal smirked, watching Will's half erection hungrily. One of his hands went to softly circle Will's throat - not pressing, only adding to the picture of submission: Will helpless, flushed, arms tied atop his head, every breath a gift that Hannibal granted him. The other hand wandered lower, dragging itself leisurely down Will's chest, following the trail of hair that led to his dick.

Will didn't react. He thought now that perhaps this *was* someone else's memory. Perhaps the pendulum had swung, and never stopped. Perhaps he'd forgotten it was swinging in the first place. Yes, it could be. He could be living someone else's truth in that moment, about to wake up.

'Is it this you want?' the other man continued, lost in his own lust, fingers circling Will's shaft and lightly squeezing - a promise, a tease, 'Do you want that, sweetheart?'

And still, Will didn't answer. Didn't squirm either. Disconnected. In his head, toying with this impossibility of dreams and illusions. Comfortably denying his life.

Hannibal didn't let up. His eyes sparkled at the resistance, and he stroked expertly from root to tip. Raked Will's face in search of a reaction - was faced with nothing but a twitch of muscle.

Will was gone. He was somewhere else, where only the breeze touched his skin.

'Such a stubborn little boy,' he chuckled, and ran his fingers through Will's cock, pressed at the vein on the underside of it, moved up to roll his balls in the palm of his hand; all these little things, so tender yet precise, so sure to earn him a moan, a whimper, a signal of rendition, elicited nothing but a huff. In the white moonlight, the shadows twirled and Hannibal heaved, but Will was marble still and forest quiet.

Creases of worry deepened in his forehead. Will saw them through lenses of hazy figures. And a hand came to cup Will's face, a firm touch, an appeal for attention.

'Come on, darling,' Hannibal urged, rocking down decisively against Will, a pressure he couldn't escape - couldn't remain oblivious to. An appeal for Will to thrust up, abandoning himself to frantic relief under Hannibal's scrutiny, eyes glazed and skin tinged in the sepia tones of treasured photographs.

But still, Will was placidly unimpressed, and it was now due to a conflict in his mind so demanding that it drew the blood from his body and shrunk the nerves in his limbs, and this conflict dwelled over that same lack of reaction. Because now he wondered, in that trance he'd created, if that state of mind was indeed an organic refuge his spirit had scavenged to escape the abuse, or if it'd been forged, a sham to discomfit Hannibal.

Will didn't know. He'd heard of victims disconnecting in extreme circumstances - but he didn't feel like a victim, or that his circumstances were extreme, and victim was the name of all the strangers in murder scenes, but his name was Will Graham, so he *couldn't be* a victim. The rules didn't apply to him, the expectations were impossibly high for him, and he felt so weak, running into his mind instead of fighting. It felt an awful lot like quitting.

'Will, dear, talk to me,' came Hannibal's voice to rouse him, to selfishly bring him down when he wanted to *fly*.

Thumbs swiped over the skin just under his eyes, a request - an order - for Will to look at him.

Will didn't. Because the trance was molasses sticky and honey gold, and he was sunken in it; letting his weight sink him further, like his mind was being pushed down, through esophagus and intestine, and it'd retreat somewhere by his pelvic bone or maybe lodged under his ankle, and his skull would be perfectly hollow, and when Hannibal cracked it open there'd be nothing he could steal.

'Will.'

He didn't have to talk. When had words gone well for him?

'Will, be a good boy and answer me.'

Let Hannibal use his body. He didn't have to be present. Maybe he'd go for a walk.

Hannibal got off him. His legs were lifted. Placed in Hannibal's shoulders, perhaps? Will wasn't sure: his eyes were busy recreating Wolftrap, replacing the walls of that pretty moonlit bedroom with snow and wood and leaves.

Hannibal drew closer; Will could feel himself folding, knees almost joined with his chest. So incredibly open for Hannibal, his entrance in full view, all his limbs conveniently out of the way.

Will expected some kind of penetration. Natural progression.

Something else happened.

A sharp impact on the back of his thigh. A hot sting.

Will muffled out a groan.

The walls of his home wavered.

Another hit came, directly on the warm flesh where his thigh curved into the globes of his ass. The pain prickled up; he tried to squirm, but Hannibal readjusted his leg firmly on top of his shoulder.

It took him time to understand it. His mind fluttered in efforts of finding the word.

They were slaps.

Once and once again, unforgiving and urgent and so ruthlessly *real.* So present, beckoning Will's mind up, squeezing through flesh and blood to fill up his head again, and he didn't *want* it. He wanted his vision blurred and his thoughts submerged. He wanted to not pay attention.

But every slap was an order, an overwhelming set of screams contradicting him, and he was blinking, his vision clearing.

The snow melted. The wood snapped. The leaves crunched. Wolftrap fell.

He wasn't a victim. He was Will Graham. It was the middle of the night, he was in Italy, and thinking of other places didn't change this place, and seeing the sky differently didn't change the sky, and he couldn't run.

'Hannibal,' he croaked, and it felt strange to hear his own voice.

Another slap to his ass. It burnt. And there was the open window, the white walls, the dresser, the mirror, the vase with the plant, and Hannibal in front of him, features tight and determined, eyes dark with ill-hidden sadistic arousal, administering hits on his upper and inner thighs, on the reddened flesh of his ass.

Will was being spanked. Hannibal was spanking him.

His psychiatrist, his old friend, the cannibal, the killer, the psychopath that had abducted him was spanking him.

'Hannibal, *stop*!'

'Be still, Will,' the words may have been meant to be cold - an assertive facade - but they came out incredibly heated and desperately lustful; Hannibal may had harboured the main intent of rousing Will from his trance, but he'd obviously been consumed by his own desires.

'Fuck, Hannibal, this is ridiculous, I'm not a child!'

Hannibal's eyes flashed with something dangerous.

'You're not, but sometimes little boys need to be disciplined, don't they? Especially when they don't listen to their caretakers.'

Another slap. Two more, quick succession, one to each of Will's inner thighs. Will groaned; it was humiliating how such a silly thing could hurt so much, how it made him squirm and try to get free.

And Hannibal's words, so fueled with want, so *deluded* - Will wanted to recoil from this, so uncomfortable inside Hannibal's fantasy.

'You're not my fucking caretaker, Hannibal.'

Hannibal smirked. His hand closed in on Will's skin again, but instead of spanking it splayed possessively over it, groping the still stinging red marks and prodding deviously at them.

Will bit his lip to stop any whimper from spilling out.

'I beg to differ. Do I not feed you and house you?' his tone pitched lower, rough, and he moved to mouth at the side of Will's face 'Have I not bathed you and tucked you into bed? Have I not picked out your clothes?' I am your caretaker, Will, and I'll spank you when I see fit.'

He kissed Will's cheek sweetly and punctuated the speech with a particularly hard slap on Will's right ass cheek. Will clenched his teeth at the pain, and tried to block off the vein of humiliation that sprouted free at Hannibal's words. He spoke like Will *needed* help, when he'd been forced into this situation, when *Hannibal* was the one who wanted it.

'I never asked for any of that,' Will hissed bitterly.

'And I did not say I cared for you selflessly.' Hannibal retorted with an amused smile before nipping at Will's knee.

Will resisted the urge to ram his knee against Hannibal's face.

'Stop now. Please.'

Hannibal was back to softly petting Will's abused flesh, fingers soothing the blooming bruises.

'You needed to be taught a lesson, sweetheart. I will take defiance, but never silence.'

Will shook his head incredulously.

'You can't demand that of me. That's not fair.'

Because it *wasn't*. Because Hannibal couldn't force him into these situations and not even let him stay silent. Because the only way to handle this was by hiding in his own mind, and Hannibal didn't even allow him that.

It felt, abstractly so, like a tear was sliding discreetly up his eye. About to fall.

But Will had taught himself that crying made everything feel worse - made everything feel *tragic*.

Will didn't cry.

And that tear, be it of anger, be it of despair, didn't fall.

'You cannot solve this by wandering into your own mind, Will. I will not let you.'

'How can I solve it then?' Will murmured, so helpless, so tired.

Hannibal smiled a sad little smile.

'Must it be solved?'

As if it could be perfectly fine. As if, changing lenses, Will could be content.

He couldn't.

'It's broken,' he ended up saying, soft, low, appealing to Hannibal's common sense.

He got a hint of dejected comprehension for his trouble. Then, it disappeared with a squeeze of Will's inner thigh - for Hannibal, nothing was broken; rather, with Will there, beneath him, for him to touch and spoil, it was all coming together.

He pressed a gentle, humble kiss to Will's lips.

Were Will to bite his tongue off, and Hannibal would probably be proud.

'Will you be here with me now, sweetheart, or should I spank you again?'

'Hannibal-'

The curve of his ass was slapped - lightly, just a warning.

'Yes or no, dear.'

'What happens if I say no?' Will insisted, hissing when he was slapped again, more forcefully this time. The sounds of skin hitting skin seemed to drive Hannibal on, a  low growl - the rough purr that comes deep from someone's throat - audible each time he spanked Will.

'Then we continue until you say yes.'

What an accurate sentence that was to describe their relationship.

'Ok then,' he nodded curtly and dropped his head on the pillow, staring at the ceiling.

Hannibal hummed, horribly pleased, and carefully placed Will's legs back down, bent, spread with his feet on the mattress. He ran his hands up and down them, from his ankles to Will's crotch. He rubbed at the base of his cock mischievously - with his mind sharp and aware again, and the distraction of the spanking removed, Will could feel that he was still half-hard.

'Did you enjoy the spanking, dear one?' Hannibal said, a humorous lilt to his tone.

'You know I didn't,' Will replied coldly. Hannibal had said, after all, that he'd accept defiance.

'Are you quite sure?' Hannibal teased, stroking Will's erection determinedly, making it fill up even more.

Will rolled his eyes, and he'd even look indifferent - he was so close - but he could feel his cheeks heat up, reddened at the playful words and the steady stimulation, the lingering sting in his ass and thighs like ghostly fingers were still groping the flesh there. A small blush, but Hannibal was ever attentive, particularly to his face as he was avid for reactions, and so it wouldn't go unnoticed.

'Save all that, Hannibal,' he said nonetheless, because coldness, be it genuine or feigned, hurts, 'Just do whatever it is you want to do.'

There was a downtick of displeasure in Hannibal's lip. But he was lenient - Will was talking, after all - and moved on.

'And what shall I do?' Hannibal wondered out loud, suggestive, one finger questioningly running up the length of Will's dick, now almost fully hard.

'I don't care,' Will said tightly. It cost him to do it - he cared so much - but he was done with despair. His voice was tired; it'd been killed by deaf ears.

Once more, Hannibal hummed, thinking. His chest moved slow, steady, towering above Will, muscles flexing and chest hair glinting silver-gold under gentle moonbeams.

After a moment, which Will took to work on his breathing and try, unsuccessfully, to will his erection down, Hannibal's eyes widened dangerously; Will had seen that look before, in the eyes of murderers: the forming of a design.

'Alright, sweetheart, move up for me, yes?'

And that was new. That was fucking new, and Will hated that.

'What-' he began to ask, but Hannibal was all around him, reaching behind him to free the chain from the bedpost and gripping it firmly in his hand.

'Turn around for me, love,' and his free hand was on Will's flank, insistent, coaxing.

'Hannibal, what are you doing?' Will asked, trying to conceal the panic in his voice as he was turned over, chest on the bed and arms raised uncomfortably above his head.

'Belly up,' Hannibal was speaking, cooing so encouragingly, but he didn't really have anything but a romantic hope that Will would comply; he moved Will into the position himself, hand coming down to slide between the soft flesh of Will's stomach and the mattress and forcing him to rise to his knees.

'I don't like this,' Will was biting his lip, looking behind him at Hannibal's unfaltering expression, squirming slightly against Hannibal's guiding hands.

'Just relax,' Hannibal patted his back, then looped the chain back on the bedpost, 'Hold the headboard like this, dear, so you have some support,' and just like that Will was on his knees for Hannibal, bent for him, ass completely exposed.

He didn't know whether he should stare at the wall or back at Hannibal. His neck twitched back and forth. He jingled the cuffs, tried to raise his arms to take the chain out from behind the bedpost, but Hannibal firmly pressed his arms back down.

'No, darling, like this,' he stated patiently, on his knees as well, body half draped over Will's to admire his work of art.

"Hannibal, no, I really hate it,' he tried, and again he raised his arms, trying to twist his body to turn back around, and again Hannibal stilled him.

'Now why would you hate it, Will?' Hannibal smoothed his hands reassuringly up Will's back, then draped himself fully on top of him to press a kiss to his curls, nuzzling the skin behind his ear, 'Do you know how beautiful you look? My good, good boy, so beautiful like this for me.'

'I just...' he didn't know how to explain; he didn't *want* to explain. Because he felt small and vulnerable and defenseless, and his fingers were white-knuckled on the headboard, and it bothered him that he couldn't see Hannibal, and his erection was bobbing uncomfortably in the air, and he *hated* it and he couldn't speak it in words and make it *real.*

'It's just like what we did before, my love,' Hannibal went on between kisses to his neck and shoulders, 'It'll be even easier like this. Let me show you. Please, Will.'

'Hannibal, can't we please just...' and what was he supposed to say? What would Hannibal listen to? '...just not like this.'

Hannibal sucked a hungry mark on Will's nape. Will could feel the intoxicating warmth of his chest against his back; could feel his erection, still clothed, slotting so perfectly between

Will's cheeks, rocking ever so softly, a promise, a plead for permission. Hannibal's tone was begging when he spoke:

'We'll try it, just try it. You can do that for me, can't you, Will? My good little boy, you can do this for me.'

And Will didn't know what to say. Because there were moments where instincts went to love, and instincts went to the picture he had of Hannibal before it had all happened, and the only way to silence these instincts was to silence himself with them.

Faced with the lack of response, Hannibal dislodged. Will heard those familiar signs of lubricant, and swallowed dry.

Once more, terrified.

He wondered if it'd happen often. If he'd always feel so afraid.

Then again, the possibility that he wouldn't was its own type of terrifying.

He felt the cold substance being poured into his entrance, and risked a look behind his back: there Hannibal was, sitting on his heels, pants now removed so his own cock stood erect and intimidating toward his firm chest, eyes glazed over in red arousal.

He stopped looking. Looked at the wall instead. It was a much less conflicting view.

'Focus on your breathing, darling,' Hannibal advised as he began pushing one lubricated finger in.

Will remembered the sting. The stretch; the horrible notion of fullness being inevitably replaced with new and new limits, as Hannibal's finger pressed incessantly further.

But it seemed to be over quicker. Seemed to slide in smoother.

'See? You take it so well like this, Will. So perfect for me,' Hannibal preened, marvelled, moving the finger experimentally in and out.

Will did focus on his breathing. It gave him something else to think about.

'A vision you are, absolutely sinful,' Hannibal's tongue was loose, words tumbling over wantonly. His free hand came to trail the curve of Will's ass, thumb circling the spots he'd spanked, 'Still so red, my beauty; how well you endured your disciplining. I was so proud of you, my obedient little boy.'

And Hannibal pulled his finger out, and slid it back along with a second one. The wet sounds of the lubricant and the unwilling swaying of his body, which Will could only stop by bracing himself against the headboard, made him flush. How hopelessly weak he must look, panting and struggling at two fingers, bitting off moans each time a thrust was particularly brazen.

'How do you feel, sweetheart? Are you here with me?'

Will didn't answer. He was trying to quench the ridiculous impulse to meet those overwhelming thrusts.

And then there was a precise jab to his prostate, nerves singing a crescendo, and Will couldn't hold in his gasp.

'Oh fuck,' he groaned out.

'That's it, darling,' Hannibal cooed, and Will could feel the smirk in his tone, 'Stay right here with me, don't retreat into your mind.'

'Hannibal, *fuck*,' he said, because he felt like he should protest, but he didn't have the strength for eloquency.

'Does that feel good, Will? Would you like more?' and Hannibal was readily pushing another finger in, stretching Will with three fingers, releasing a low growl when Will's hole fluttered and sucked him in.

Hannibal's hand had settled on Will's hip to make sure he'd meet his thrusts, forcing Will to sway back and forth more pronouncedly. It made his fingers slide out easier and slide in deeper, enhancing the dizzying sensation and making each rewarding jab to his prostate nearly unbearable. Will's cock was bouncing furiously, drops of precum on the sheet below him, and he wanted more than anything to touch himself, to relieve that weight, that ache, but when he moved his hands mindlessly, trying to reach it, Hannibal heard the clinking of the cuffs and was immediately stilling his arms, not even slowing down his rhythm.

'Don't be impatient, sweetheart. I'll take care of you, just be still for me,' Hannibal said, and his hand came to rest on Will's back, pressing it down and forcing Will to arch, his ass riding up in the most humiliating show of submission, 'Just like this, all for me to see, yes?'

And then those fingers were fully out of him, and there were more obscene squelching sounds, and a soft, controlled grunt from Hannibal.

When he returned, his hand came immediately to double down the arching of Will's back - Will had changed positions soon after Hannibal had stepped off, not being able to bear how defenseless he felt. But now Hannibal, forever seeing, was pushing him down further in reprimand and he had no choice but to follow, stiffling a pointless protest.

'You'll feel so filled like this, sweetheart,' Hannibal assured, his now lubricated cock poking at his heat, 'Stay as you are, so breathtaking like this.'

And then Hannibal was pushing in, incessant, unrepentant, and Will was breathing through it with bitter grunts, disbelieving that this was happening *again*, that Hannibal could bring it to fruition so simply.

'Hannibal, I can't-' he said, panicked, because how had it fit last time? How had he endured it?

'Yes, you can, my love. You were fated for it, fated for me,' came Hannibal's unrelenting confidence, muffled at the end as he finally bottomed out and stilled inside Will's body, chest against his arched back, breathing heavily against his curls.

Will's own breath was broken. He held tightly onto the headboard, trying to support the added weight.

'So perfect, dear,' Hannibal murmured, awed, against his ear, 'Never has any poet described the love you make me feel; never will any composer evoke the wonder it is to be fully inside you.'

And with religious fervor he began to move, making Will shake on the bed with powerful thrusts, hips snapping against Will's sore ass.

'Hannibal, please,' Will panted thoughtlessly, purposelessly, drowning under the waves of pleasure that came from every thrust, angled precisely so it'd hit Will's prostate.

'Give yourself to me, Will, come for me, right here beneath me,' Hannibal urged, fucking Will punishingly.

'*God*,' Will moaned, so close, and it felt like his own eyelids were trembling, as if he was blinking nonstop, or perhaps his eyes had rolled, ashamed, to look into his own skull.

'That's it, Will. Come for me, baby boy,' Hannibal growled.

And suddenly Will's eyes were wide open, and the edge had receded, and his movements had stuttered. Because that name, that was simply *wrong*.

'Hannibal, what the *fuck*-' he stammered, trying so hard to speak between the unforgiving thrusts that sent his body flying, '- don't fucking call me that.'

'But it's true,' Hannibal's voice was rough, desperate against his ear, 'You're my baby boy, aren't you, Will? My little baby boy that I love so much, and you're going to come for me like you're meant to.'

And without wanting to, without even processing how or *why*, Will was back at the edge, and his eyes were shut closed and he was falling, shouting as he spilled all over the sheets.

Hannibal growled at the sight of Will coming untouched, at the feeling of his ass clenching down on his cock, and his thrusts became frenzied, painfully passionate, fucking Will through his orgasm and toward his own. He came inside Will with an inhuman howl, gripping Will's hips to bury himself inside his tight heat as much as he could.

Will was still speechless when Hannibal's thrusts stilled, still speechless minutes after when he pulled out. Speechless, mindless, when Hannibal softly undid the handcuffs and helped him lay down.

'I'll go fetch a washcloth, dearest,' Hannibal said so tenderly, planting a kiss to his temple.

The pillow was soft. The moonlight had the palest, most elegant hue.

Will felt irremediably ruined.

He was asleep before Hannibal returned.

---

There was breakfast the morning after.

There was breakfast, because the world doesn't stop when bad things happen.

Will had known that his entire life.

There was breakfast, but it was different. Because Will took his plate, stood up and left the table without a word.

He didn't leave his bedroom for the rest of the day.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys liked it! Feel free to leave suggestions, complaints or any comment that you'd please down below, and see you guys in the next one!~ <3

# Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

My friends, my fellow readers, we have returned! I proudly present to you the fourth chapter of Enduring, a looong installment for you guys to enjoy, just shy of 18.000 words, because my entire life's purpose is to spoil you.

NOW, it should be noted: my holidays have finished. I am back to responsibilities. Which meaaans the next update will take longer, BUT, do not fret, do not worry, this will not be abandoned! So if you get frustrated because I've been taking fucking foreeeever to post, just remember → in that moment, I am either sleeping, eating, studying or writing this fic.

~ Okay, small details about the chapter ~

• To everyone that's been hoping in the comments for an uprising of Will, everyone, here it is, freshly for you in all its glory!

• This chapter plays with suggestions by Nonottoday and Lizzy22, and it includes a part that honours our fellow reader itsalwaystheapocalypse's suggestion as well. I won't spoil it for you guys, but they'll know what it is, and I hope I did it justice <3

•Chapter has references and spoilers to the classic '1984', by George Orwell. If you don't know, it's a dystopian novel that depicts an extreme dictatorship, a government that controls everything about everyone, down to their thoughts. You know the expression «Big Brother's watching»? That's where it comes from. The main character is Winston and the plot follows his attempts at rebellion. It's a great book, I reaaally recommend it.

Okay, I've ranted for long enough, please enjoy a little over 1h of self-indulgent Hannigram~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will and Hannibal hadn't spoken for four days.

Well, Hannibal had spoken plenty, and Will, he supposed, had spoken too - at Winston, when Hannibal wasn't around, or to himself, alone in his bedroom, in comforting whispers before he fell asleep. Hannibal's voice was heard in self-confident monologues, and Will's voice prevailed hushed and secretive in a corner - words like this, scattered in the air, loose and brief, became their feeble form of dialogue.

Will didn't mind.

Not particularly.

The silence was... refreshing.

Because Hannibal and Will were two people of extremely different lifestyles; they didn't enjoy the same hobbies, nor frequent the same circles - mostly, they disagreed. They weren't meant to coalesce, and when they did, it'd been in the abstract tie of dialogue; they were bound by the curious bridge of language; lending little steps for the other to climb, sharing their interpretations of the view. In sessions, and crime scenes, and dinners, they leaned into each other's mouths, marveled at the words slipping from their teeth.

They saw they were equals. And they took a moment to appreciate each other's suits, take in how life had made them different.

Will's votes of silence had removed that bond. And now Will watched in wonder as their synchrony crumbled, and the void grew between them, and they became what they were always meant to be: two very different strangers, confined in the same space.

Hannibal didn't enjoy the silence.

He fought it with delicate delusion.

Handcrafted in his office during the night. Pretty, self-indulgent: it was fine. Lovers argue.

And lovers eat by themselves in their bedrooms, and dutifully exit the room when the other comes near. Lovers pretend the other doesn't exist; ignoring with lips zipped and eyes skittering to the window.

Just a phase. A bump in the road.

So Hannibal spoke. He bid Will good morning and goodnight; he described them their meals, voice unperturbed as Will grabbed his plate and turned towards the stairs; he chatted over the weather, the classical piece that was playing, the book he was reading. Little pleasantries, gifted words, an offer to reconcile.

Will never responded.

He kept his distance.

To his delight, Hannibal never touched him.

And Will felt like he'd become his own person again. Like his integrity had been restored; piece by piece, battered, but entirely genuine, a token, a talisman, a reminder not to give in to Hannibal's design, not to mirror his intentions.

He was himself. He was Will Graham. Winston was his dog, Wolf Trap his home, and Hannibal his abductor.

Everything had a name, and everything was simple.

Those were the kind of short-sayings that had become Will's preferred mantras, the little words of solid truth he'd repeat in the quiet of the night, mumbled into Winston's fur.

He'd repeat them too when Hannibal had to leave the house, leaving him in his bedroom with doors and windows locked. Now, as Hannibal had run out for supplies, he was in that precise situation, stretched out on the bed, fingers entwined on his stomach, staring at the white of the ceiling.

'The dog can't come in with you, darling. I'll be out for a few hours and he might need food,' Hannibal had said, gently coaxing Winston out the bedroom.

Winston had looked back with reluctant eyes. Will hadn't been able to soothe him - that would mean letting Hannibal hear his voice after four days of rigid deprivation.

'I'll be back shortly, love.'

Like Will cared.

The room was boring.

He had a book. He felt too reckless to read. He could see in vivid detail, played out on the ceiling, the scene of the truck disappearing - he'd spied it through the window, as it left the garage and moved so swiftly through the dirt path, inconspicuous in its unremarkable model and colour, Hannibal's discreet way of transportation.

He could see it, and he wanted to be in it.

Driving away, shielded in metal and glass, Winston barking beside him. Out of that cursed house. He'd scream then, he imagined. He'd scream, because he could, and because Hannibal wouldn't hear him.

He stared at his watch - more exactly, the watch Hannibal had bought for him and left so casually, so lightly, in a little box inside one of the drawers of his dresser. He'd been there for two hours: it was 4pm now, and the italian sunlight came in blindingly scalding through the window, all warm sunflower rays and buzzing heat on his skin. It instilled the air with sticky weight and the walls with lazy waves of yellowed light.

He thought: he could close the curtains.

But he didn't.

Will had been laying down for so long, he'd lost notion of feet and legs and waist. He was all his mind, all his fingers that ghosted distractedly through the linen covers.

And in his mind, he looked at Hannibal's pockets. He looked and searched through a dummy of Hannibal's figure, frenzied eyes and wandering fingers desperate for that glint of silver he'd seen one day ago, that little ring Hannibal had swiftly hid away somewhere in his clothing.

A keychain.

Glistening so innocently in Hannibal's hand.

A blissful sight that had, in the flashing instant it had been uncovered, burst in Will's chest with invigorated purpose: his picture of escape had subtext now, had steps to precede it; there was a keychain, and in it keys - to his room, to the garage, to the truck? -, and if Will could seize it, then Will was free, Will had control; and if he didn't, if he failed, then he had tried so explicitly, so undoubtedly, and his snickering mind, in its constant lies, would not have the nerve to tell him he was accepting his new life. He was enduring.

No. Will would try.

And though the sunflower light, in its yellow air of idleness that left him close-eyed and sighing on the bed, seemed to suggest otherwise, Will would succeed.

---

The next day, Will sat on the edge of the sofa, legs tightly crossed and a book in his lap. Neck crooked defensively, posture slightly twisted, his front to the wide glass panels and his side to the inside of the house.

Winston was running in the plains outside. Chasing something, a little blur of fur. Will tracked his movements with a paternal eye, intermittently looking away to watch the sky instead, the way it had began to flare from blues to orange pinks.

He'd gotten bored of his bedroom.

For days he'd lived nearly exclusively in the little room, feverishly confined - save for brief excursions to the bathroom, to fetch food or to check up on Winston. And the wooden dresser, the long-limbed plant, the white shutters, the linen covers: they undulated now, unpredictably quick between primitive comfort and sickening hediousness, which meant one pressing thing - either he left now or he'd never leave.

Winston caught the little thing, a scruffy rat with endearing ears. It disappeared inside his mouth, his little tail hanging between two teeth.

Will sighed. He felt like that rat, swallowed in dark blindness and suffocating heat. And the dog, the dog that ate him, it wasn't only Hannibal; no, it was his own mind as well, the sordid bit he'd so determinedly repressed, the devious side burgeoning under Hannibal's care.

It was one thing to fight others; another to do so while fighting himself.

He looked around the house: the living room was empty, the kitchen, in its enclosure of counters, as well as the little nook where they - or, well, Hannibal - ate meals, were empty too. As the silent days had stretched on, Hannibal had spent less and less time downstairs, preferring to stay in his impromptu office instead.

Will supposed it was a self-deluded attempt at remaining close to him.

It suited him just fine. He didn't want to coexist with Hannibal, he didn't want them sharing air. This way, he could leave his bedroom for a time, freshen up under higher ceilings and farther walls without having to gift Hannibal with his presence; nor letting Hannibal think that his rebellion had eased, and that this was a shy step in the path to forgiveness.

Originally, he planned to leave in less than an hour.

He just wanted to breathe.

But Will was comfortable, and Winston was still tirelessly running through the grass, and the sky was misty pink, and in his book, '1984', the main character, of name also Winston, had finally found a room for him and Julia, a refuge far from Big Brother's unrelenting eye. Time went on with each glance out the window, each worried second where he couldn't see Winston, each page turned. It was nice.

It was pleasant.

When Hannibal came down, polished steps so ginger and soft, Will was almost tempted to ignore them.

In his corner, seeing the sky darken.

But Will couldn't. It wasn't in his nature to ignore.

He shifted his body a little to the right; discreetly, out the corner of his eye, he peeked at where Hannibal now stood, immobile, at the end of the stairs.

He was looking at him.

Eyebrows raised, lips just the littlest bit parted. Hands by his sides.

Hannibal was surprised.

Will huffed, then turned his focus back to the book. After one short moment, Hannibal came alive again, and disappeared somewhere.

Will didn't check to see where he'd gone. He was resolute in being indifferent. As far as he was concerned, they were permanently separated by glass: two neighbours in adjacent houses, two men who'd never met. And if Hannibal spoke, Will wouldn't bat an eye - the neighbours were noisy, and that was the end of it.

He wished his little stratagem had bloomed of self-preservation, an innocent intent on defending himself, but there was an evil part to it: Hannibal liked being noticed. It was etched in his psyche, apparent in his every breath, in the way he'd impossibly imposed on Will the burden of suffering consciously, when he'd freed him of his blessed trance all those nights ago. He detested being ignored.

So Will pretended to ignore him, in part to fortify his own sanity, in part to spite him.

'Would you like some music?'

Came Hannibal's voice, a curious venture, a tentative experiment.

Seeing if it had ended. If the lovers would reunite once more.

Will looked at his book. Silent.

Soon enough came the sound of violins. Crisp and soft controversies of bows on strings, ivory keys cricketing in the background. Lulling sounds, no vocals, uninterrupted compositions twirling as a refined soundtrack for an idle life.

Will suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. It would be in bad taste, he admitted: the piece itself was quite nice.

Hannibal returned to his field of vision with a glass of wine and a book of his own. Not brash enough to sit in the same sofa as Will, he opted instead for an armchair to its right. He sat, crossed his leg, opened the book on his thigh, sipped his wine, and stared at Will.

‘It’s getting quite late. Perhaps I should go fetch Winston, no?’

A sing-song tone, perfectly content; like all Hannibal needed was to mimic this intimacy.

Will didn’t answer: he didn’t need to; Hannibal always let Winston out for an hour before dusk.

He looked at the window. The light blues had gone, all orange, purple, black now.

‘Are you enjoying your book?

More heat in the words. More pressing.

Winston had settled. He spun in slow circles, a half-hearted attempt to chase his tail.

Will wished he could sleep with Winston at night. But lately he’d woken up to him whimpering, scratching at the door, and since he couldn’t open it for him on his own – the door locked every single night -, Will had had to face the fact that Winston was better off outside.

It made nights lonely. It made mornings flat.

‘I was planning on fish for dinner. Something light.’

It sounded like begging.

The violins had reached their crescendo of shrill strings; the piano deepened, the cello rumbled. Will glanced bitterly at Winston – because he couldn’t open the door and call him himself, because he couldn’t join him amidst quiet nature, because he was trapped - stood up and moved to leave.

‘Will-' Hannibal tried, and his fingers, in a rash motion, came to encircle Will’s wrist.

Will shook his hand off tersely – and to Hannibal's apologetic eyes, to the despair that sung, amidst notes of tragic symphony, for him to stay, for him to speak, Will answered with nothing but a tightening of his lips.

He was in his room before the piece ended.

In his own refuge, he read another chapter of '1984'. Winston had night terrors, visions of himself before a wall, and on the other side of the wall, with ominous squeaks, hundreds of big black rats. He fell asleep with that picture in his mind.

Like the little rat the dog had caught, Will felt swallowed.

---

The lock clicked open.

Will had been awake for half an hour, shaping shadows with his eyes, thinking of how strange it felt to sleep in that bed - to like that bed - despite all that there had happened. He was thinking, with the brevity of thought insomniacs think, and so he heard it distinctly when the lock clicked.

Hannibal opened the door cautiously, still.

A little bit of light came from the hallway. Will, who'd been staring at the ceiling, instinctively closed his eyes; frozen, feigning sleep, battling the urge to look at Hannibal.

The man's footsteps were soft against the floorboard. Slow. Each step measured.

And when he reached the bed, he stopped. Will could feel it, this presence looming, this warm body standing over him with deep breaths and hungry eyes.

It was very simple, really: Hannibal had been starved, and he'd come to feed.

And Will didn't move.

Because he didn't want to. Because it was nighttime and he was supposed to be asleep, and if Hannibal wished to brood as he stared, to lurk in a corner like a sulking child, then Will didn't have to indulge him. He would lay silent and dormant until Hannibal left - he wouldn't waste his breath fighting a war he wouldn't win; he wouldn't squirm away to have Hannibal corner him, wouldn't begin resisting only to have to suppress his urges to scream, or otherwise lose his shield of silence. It was all chess, and Hannibal was beckoning him to play: whatever he did, once he moved that first pawn, would lead to defeat.

The only way to win was not to play. If he didn't touch a single piece, how could he lose?

With a rustling of fabric, Hannibal sunk one knee on the mattress beside him. Will wanted so badly to sigh - a greedy soul Hannibal had, a soul which craved for touch.

It was light, at least. Hesitant, like Hannibal feared some unspoken consequence. Will felt fingers land on his cheek, up his forehead, fussing with his curls.

He thought: it'd be nice to punch him.

Like he'd done that night moons ago - so long, so long ago - when they were still in Baltimore, and there was still a glimmer of uncertainty, a budding hope that maybe Hannibal would drop him off at his house, and all would be forgotten.

That night where he'd heard Hannibal's jaw crack, and he'd been so disappointed not to see blood, not to see *bone*, because violence was the only fitting measure for what Hannibal had put him through.

That night where he'd still let himself feel this sympathy for him, for his old friend. When that past affection was not yet fully buried.

As the fingers trailed so sweetly across his skin, Will wondered if, even now, a piece of it was still stubbornly uncovered.

It didn't matter, anyhow. Any love had been poisoned: Hannibal, to keep it, had killed it.

The touches turned more brazen after a while. Hannibal's reticence gave way to growing enthusiasm, to a territorial urge to reaffirm every inch of skin as his. To revisit Will's body and take solace in it, seeing as his mind was inaccessible.

Will suppressed a chill as Hannibal removed the covers from over his chest. And now, as the situation turned from innocently irking to quick and worrying, Will decided that, if Hannibal dared to ride his shirt up, he'd truly punch him again.

But he didn't. His touches were all chaste, little pressings of his hand on his belly, above his ribcage, below his shoulders. And if felt, ridiculously so, like such a childish behaviour: this man, this narcissistic genius, this murderer comforting himself in this pointless tactile confirmation that Will existed, that he was still, for the time being, with him; that his voice was being withheld, but the man, the *body*, remained.

There were even tender circles on his stomach, rhythmic pets in that place Will had reluctantly said felt nice. These little things that stretched for too long, longer than Hannibal had taken in other spots of his skin, and it felt like Hannibal was doing it for himself - with Will angry at him, refusing his company, his touch, he resorted to this one single thing he knew Will liked, a small appeasement to his regretful spirit; he told Will how sorry he was without facing rejection, and eased his guilt by doing something right.

Maybe it would have worked, were Will asleep; maybe he would have given Hannibal this unconscious sign of forgiveness, this sweet sigh, this pleasured moan, a loving sound, deprived of malice, for Hannibal to cling gratefully to and use as fuel, as sustenance, for when day came and Will was once more cold, distant.

But Will was awake. And he disliked the idea of helping Hannibal, even if it could possibly get the man off him sooner.

They both suffered from wounds they inflicted, the sweetest unison screams. That's how it worked.

He didn't clench his teeth, nor press his lips together; instead, in bitter self-control, in his imposed discretion, he pressed his tongue against the top of his mouth - the only thing Hannibal couldn't see, couldn't *know*. His exterior was a puppet for Hannibal to relish in, but within him hid a complexity of independence he'd never own.

Not a sound came out of him throughout Hannibal's touches; not a fluttering of eyelids, nor a pleased twitch of muscle. Even like this, Will played unknowing indifference perfectly.

Hannibal persisted for moments longer, more urgent, displeased - petulant, and wasn't he the most emotional psychopath? A cocktail of romantic buzz and tragic vileness; devils in suits and angels defiled, the irony he'd perfumed his life in.

He relented, eventually. Hovered uncertainly above Will, and Will dared to hope he'd move completely away. Maybe he'd come out unscathed, unbothered. Each and every pawn still in place.

But Hannibal didn't.

He never did.

He pressed further, coaxing Will to the finish line.

The aura of heat went impossibly nearer. Will felt against his face small puffs of air.

How close would Hannibal be? How many milliseconds before his chest collapsed with Will's, stripping him even of the air in his lungs?

And Will thought once more, because he'd always been perfect at envisioning violence: now; now, if he kisses me, I'll punch him.

And Hannibal, because he was a demon, and his every cell busied on to feed Will's turmoil, moved away.

Will's violence was contained, just like it always was, every living second since his birth, perilously brimming inside his skull.

He heard the subtle shuffling as Hannibal got off the bed; felt the mattress shift as his weight was withdrawn - and he spied with a squinted eye as Hannibal's back, broad, poised, retreated towards the door, leaving, defeated, as silently as he came.

---

'Will.'

The determined tilt made Will falter.

Usually, there were only light-hearted courtesies for breakfast - a polite good morning while Will went down to get his plate, an 'enjoy' when he turned his back to leave.

'Will,' Hannibal repeated, stronger, and Will, for curiosity's sake, stopped, turned back to Hannibal, to the sunlit dining room, and quirked an eyebrow.

'I'd like to propose something.'

The day had dawned fresh. There'd be a soft morningly breeze - he wasn't allowed to open the window anymore, but he could sit in his room, in his bed, and picture he had, picture the curtains were flowing and Italy was blowing into his face.

He looked at the omelette in his plate. In the end, he chose to listen.

Hannibal thrived under the attention: his chest puffed, his back straightened, and he cleared his voice, as if readying himself for a long speech of persuasion.

'I would like you to start spending your days down here again.'

And wasn't that rich? Wasn't that the most presumptuous opening line?

Will stayed, because Hannibal was many things - entitled, and self-involved, and hopelessly unfair in his demands - but he wasn't an *idiot*. He'd offered a proposal; undoubtedly, there'd be a gift of good faith, a gesture to entice him.

Hannibal gauged his expression, purely blank as Will had designed it, then went on:

'I would buy you fishing gear, in return. There is a shop in town with the right supplies, I believe. And I shall drive you to some deserted beach, and you can fish.'

Will's eyes widened unprompted, taking in Hannibal's hopeful face.

Will had told himself he wouldn't get excited - rushed decisions wouldn't suit him. And so, he fought the impulse of enthusiasm down, and he thought:

He hadn't apologized.

Of course he didn't - did he ever?

Why would he say sorry, when he had no intention of correcting his behaviour?

It'd be the same forever: round and round they went, vicious cycle, tantrums and emends, and they'd never change.

And Will could fixate on that and wallow in philosophical injustice; or, he could navigate inside his little pond of helplessness, play the rigged game until he could cheat his own way out. Because Hannibal hadn't truly apologized, and Will wouldn't really forgive him, but he

liked fishing - he *liked* fishing - and he could sit morosely in a couch for a few hours if that meant he got to go *outside*.

After all, Hannibal hadn't said anything about talking.

Technically, he hadn't.

So Will looked; both at Hannibal and at his plate, at the table persistently set for two - and he nodded once, tersely, minutely, before sitting down.

His eyes didn't stray from his plate the entire meal: if they did, he was sure he'd be faced with an entirely too satisfied smile, and an entirely too infatuated gaze.

It wasn't that difficult, in the end.

Not really.

There was awkward tension, sure, and resentful distance, certainly - but Will didn't let it bother him. He had a goal in mind: his lovely reasons had come to help his guilty mind. He fetched his book from his bedroom, aware of Hannibal's worried eyes pinned to his back the entire time, and settled down on his spot - and he'd designated a spot for himself, and wasn't that horrifyingly domestic? - on the couch, beckoning Winston to lay down beside him. He read, and petted Winston's soft fur absent-mindedly, and played impassive.

Hannibal, of course, made himself a viscous presence. Lurking, loitering, unsurely stepping between irradiating contentment at seeing Will there and frustration at not being able to have him as willing, as accepting as he desired.

He never went to his office; like his body gravitated towards Will, he sat promptly in the armchair beside him, reading his own book.

They looked happy.

The picture of silent romance in far-away places.

Will's impulsive stubborn streak repelled at the idea - told him to rebel, to fight -, but what was Will but a master of self-control? What had he developed more than the ability to steadily persist in his masks, in his facades, so no one could see his true spirit?

He'd been pretending since he was a child. He excelled at it.

Hannibal prepared lunch.

Lamb salad with fregola, he said. His canines glistened.

Will sat at the table; he ate. It was good.

Hannibal cleared the plates, then opened the front door for Winston to take a brief stroll.

Will didn't feel like reading. He stared.

He wondered if this would be forever. He wondered if this was Hannibal's version of idyllic love; how he'd planned their lives to be. He wondered how long Hannibal would go unbroken by Will's reluctance, how long he'd pretend it was all fine, how much he'd argue and battle before admitting they were wrong, and they had to stop.

He wondered. The sun set.

Hannibal sat beside him, two glasses of wine in hand. Will took one.

They sipped their wine in uncomfortable silence.

'It was nice to have you here today, Will,' Hannibal said after a while, in the calm tone he used to employ in their sessions.

Will nursed the wine glass in his hand. Took a bigger sip, felt the liquid run blood red down his throat.

'I must say, I do not understand your silence.'

Will didn't even dignify him with a glance.

*It's the only thing I can control*, he thought.

'What will it accomplish but isolation? What is it but an exercise of self-punishment? Why must you hurt yourself to hurt me?'

*Because we're conjoined*.

Hannibal sighed. Will downed his wine.

'We have the possibility to never be alone again. I have given us that, Will,' and Will knew Hannibal's eyes were beckoning him, those same eyes in which he'd seen himself reflected in red and brown during dimly lit evenings, between whiskey and appraising silences, when they were still circling each other; and Will ached to look into those eyes, just like he had countlessly before, and he wanted to *forget*, to plunge mindlessly into this simple picture Hannibal had built.

'You deprive us both of companionship out of loyalty to a world that's never welcomed you. They are not your people, Will. They never were.'

And they weren't, Willl *knew* that. He'd never had anyone. All his life on the outside, curious hands - Jack's, Alana's - pulling him in from time to time so he could *peek*.

Hannibal was the only one who'd walk out willingly to stand beside him, looking in.

'Will,' he'd wished to drown in that voice once; to feel it tether him somewhere quiet, 'This has all been as it's meant to be. It's time you step into your new role. See the fire I have kindled, see how gorgeous you've become.'

The ravenstag was beside him, burning into his side, suffocating, and the world was trembling around him, the windows were shattering, the walls were curling in on the black feathered beast and him, tying them into this claustrophobic box of possibilities - and they flashed beyond his eyes to a hollow voice's narration, descriptions of epic love and selfish choices, tendrils enticing him to close his eyes and live the tragic romance that awaited him, perfectly still for him, with blissful years of blurry psychosis and soulmate delusions and a professionally photographed ending plastered in criminology textbooks worlwide, two butchered bodies holding hands, two rotting corpses in a jail cell; or they'd be shot by the police, or they'd kill themselves to resist being driven apart, or they'd die quietly the most notorious killers the world had ever seen, but death, the spilt blood that had brought them together, would preserve them for eternity, and they'd exceed any lovers on Earth, for when normal people loved in life, they'd loved also in death, in graves and sliced skin, delivering spirits into the nether, rippers, both of them, terribly in love, haunting the world that had exiled them.

Glass pieces flew into the floor.

Blood red dripping down.

The wine glass fell, and Will stood.

He fled from the ravenstag and the promises on its lips.

---

Will had been thinking about his escape.

A night's sleep had swept the insidious poison from his ears - he felt renewed.

He went down to fetch his breakfast, and the antlers in Hannibal's head had already began receding, the shiest protrusions blooming amidst silver hair.

He ate in his bedroom.

He didn't need to fish that much.

The deal was off, and it was probably for the best. He knew - Will had always known - that time in Hannibal's proximity was inclined to the most upsetting bouts of enlightenment: in their sessions he'd always felt some progress, yes, but not the type he'd wanted, not the type Jack had surely been expecting.

Hannibal held his hand through uncharted territory, riverbeds with rotting ribs, drifting teeth and decomposed tongues, complimenting the scenery. And Will, drinking his words, didn't fully agree - but God, he'd wanted to.

There was the risk - Will couldn't allow this closeness; like a little kid, like a helpless patient, he had to track, monitor, *deprive*; from a certain distance, their minds, like magnets, rushed to

meld together, and when it happened, when Will shared Hannibal's eyesight, it was the most dangerous thing.

But the problem was he couldn't do much from his bedroom.

That was the main conclusion he'd reached during his alone time.

Watching the hours pass through the flickering shadows on the wall.

He couldn't spy on Hannibal through there. The most he could do was see the truck drive off through the window, but what was that worth? He needed to be downstairs, loitering by the garage door, memorizing Hannibal's routine, seeing if he ever stored that divine keychain anywhere besides his pockets.

Therein lied Will's quandary: prolongued exposure to Hannibal's mind was risky, but necessary for any hopes of escape.

Well, it wasn't a quandary. Will knew what to do. It was... difficult.

And Will's stubborness chimed in - he could linger a few more days in this beautiful isolation that, for all the damage it brought on his mind, was considerably worse for Hannibal. Then, once he was satisfied, once the needle had been pricked deep, the blade twisted far, he'd innocently commence an artificially organic progression from his rebellion to a more pliant state, a rough acceptance which Hannibal could see as harmless.

Yes, that's what he'd do.

A few more days of self-ownership, of living in a vacant head, before he'd let Hannibal wonder through its halls; a while longer of not being coddled nor molested.

A few seconds more of Will Graham.

Then, he'd exit the stage, and the decrepit hybrid Will Lecter would come in.

Footsteps came to rouse him. Will raised his head from where he was stretched on the bed, staring at the door.

The little padding came nearer, then little scratching and a yelp.

Will drew a slight smile, a fond uptick of tired lips.

It was almost time for dinner anyway - the room had turned dark yellow now that the sun had set and the only thing illuminating it were warm honey lightbulbs. A little after dusk, that's when Hannibal called.

He could go down sooner, get some food for Winston, brood in a corner until dinner was ready.

He got up with a strained groan, stretched his limbs briefly, heard the side of his neck, his shoulder blade, the ball of his shoulder crack.

His body felt confined. Cooped up.

He descended the stairs, Winston trailing beside him with a trailing tongue. Downstairs the air rippled with the usual classical compositions, the majestic piano, the fidgeting strings. Will surveyed the area, quickly catching the light blue of Hannibal's outfit in the kitchen.

Most likely busying himself with finishing touches. Plating, seasoning.

It was slightly troublesome that he was in the kitchen. The cans of gourmet food that constituted Winston's diet - for Will had been adamant that Hannibal wouldn't serve him - were also there, in one of the cupboards, in the back, neatly stored out of Hannibal's critically disapproving eye.

Again he felt the connection of magnets, the urge to let himself fly to his polar. There was an insurmountable strength in being near Hannibal - a pull away, a pull closer, and in short Will was pulled every single way so that his skin tore and his veins strained, and he wavered an inch short of splitting open.

He clenched a fist, petted Winston's head, the smooth top spot between ears, so close to that beautiful canine brain of uncorrupted feelings and dying loyalty, perfect in simple layers of primitive notions.

How he envied him; him and the birds and the caterpillars that hid and died inside their pretty cocoons.

Will went around the counters and entered the kitchen space. And there was a moment of hesitance, of lingering, because Hannibal didn't turn around - Hannibal, whose life, whose *purpose* had come to orbit Will - didn't turn.

And Will's stomach sunk, and there was something terribly wrong.

He shook his head - what did it matter? It was already wrong *before*. And he reached for the cupboard, opened it, looked inside.

Completely, pristinely, mockingly empty.

Because Hannibal was a petty, vicious man.

And Will's rejection, it hurt. He'd hurt Will in return.

Will closed the cupboard tersely, knowing Hannibal was, even with his back turned, fully in tune with him. Seeking his reaction.

Will burnt holes in Hannibal's back. Silent, forever silent - he couldn't remember his voice. And Hannibal at last turned, face impassive, two plates in hand.

He met Will's gaze, and his eyes were determined, all cold, all challenge.

He brushed past Will so cruelly quiet, toward the dining room. Will followed closely behind, seeing those mechanic movements as the man neatly placed each plate on the table and sat

down, calm observing, fork and knife waiting in hand.

The proposition was simple: sit, or Winston won't eat.

And Will hated him - oh, he hated him so much, those devilish eyes capable of such insensitivity; that pesky soul capable of such intensity; the heartless man hungry to strike; the sadist ache for others bending; the *mind games*, because Winston was sitting with pretty chestnut eyes and soft fur, and his dying loyalty, the perfect canine brain, and he deserved everything because Will *loved* him, and he was the rarest innocence in the world, and he shouldn't be a part of their game but Hannibal had made him so, and he was waiting, ever-trusting, humbly understanding - and if Will didn't feed him, he'd whine and nudge Will's knee but he'd never stray, he'd whimper so helplessly because Will *always* fed him, and Winston always loved him, and that was his world.

And Will could never fail him.

He was flawed, he was wrong. He was alike billions of humans, he didn't matter: Winston did.

So Will neared the table, stood before that man of consuming ice, of sophisticated control. And he picked up his plate, and he tilted it so much, too much, and the food came tumbling down, down onto the floor, round his shoes, round the table.

Hannibal's eyes were the coldest wrath, the most speechless outrage.

Winston smelled it, licked, ate. Will smiled at him, at the purest, best thing in his life; then, he turned, stomach empty, and left.

He holed up in his bedroom, slamming the door with one violent push, and he leaned against it, forehead pressing into the wood, eyes shut, fists clenched beside his head, and his body coiled with the irresistible urge to throw itself against the door, again and again, to bang on it with head and hands and knees, to scream in the liberal ways of childish fits.

It was so *unfair*.

But Will breathed.

It was fine.

Yes, it was fine; he'd dealt with it the best way he could. He'd succeeded, he'd fucking *won*.

He turned around, back leaning heavily on the door, and slid down. His body sagged; the tension left with a long, shaky exhale.

Winston had eaten. Hannibal's little intimidation act hadn't worked.

In his strained mind - hungry, exhausted, painfully isolated - still rang the bells of victory. Still his tired thoughts rejoiced.

Will would let his body decay to beat Hannibal. He'd wither with pride, if only Hannibal cried.

He fell asleep, eventually. Hannibal didn't come in to apologize. The next morning, the cupboard was still empty, and Hannibal had laid the table in its usual setting: two plates, the evident implication - starve in your stubbornness or come, sit, eat and I'll feed Winston in return.

It occured to Will now, in the skeptical tone life had taught him, that maybe bringing Winston along hadn't been a gift of good faith after all - maybe it had been a hidden bargaining chip, a little unprotected string tied so neatly to Will's heart.

Winston ate his breakfast. Will drank some water.

It wasn't that bad, at first. He'd skipped meals in Wolf Trap - tough to eat with a mouth full of blood, a hand full of entrails. He'd sat in the midst of all his killer minds, a ghostly sight, skin pasty and eyes numb, until the wave passed, and time returned, and his name was back. So he was used to not eating for a few hours, sometimes a full day.

But time passed in tense silence, and Hannibal didn't relent, and Will didn't eat for three days.

Hannibal was starving him.

And he didn't even look fucking *sorry*.

Like it was an appropriate strategy - like he was justified.

Will laid in his bed most of the time. His stomach hurt - a dull ache. He knew that around now the body would begin its dutifully self-sacrificing process of autophagy - eating itself in little pieces to make it all work a little longer.

He imagined it, flesh eating flesh.

Winston would nap beside him sometimes, nuzzle at him with gentle eyes. Will petted him softly between sighs. Three times a day he'd go downstairs and place his plate on the floor; never looked at Hannibal, never dared to whiff the delightful food, never lingered more than a minute - he beelined back upstairs, bit his nails, looked out the window, stared at his book, which he'd been saving, restricting himself to a few pages a day.

The fourth day came around, and he could picture his stomach: fully empty, shriveled, wrinkled, curling in on itself with painful knots. It pulsed, contracted, *whined*. And it seemed silly not to eat - why couldn't the universe permit him one single weak moment; one relapse, one bite, one lone second of indulgence that didn't count?

In the middle of the afternoon, with soft steps and a polite knock, Hannibal came into his bedroom. It was a first, and Will looked quizzically at him.

Hope bloomed - had it ended? Would the victory bells ring?

'Come downstairs, Will,' Hannibal said, hands behind his back. Will focused on his face: it could be worry, it could be anger - he didn't know, and who cared?

Hannibal, undoubtedly irked at Will's unresponsive demeanor, at the dead way he stretched on the bed, bristled:

'If you won't eat, then please come downstairs so I can monitor your condition.'

It was a good idea. But Will was so deep into his rebellions, so enticed with the romantic idea of a decisive self-destruction, of hurting himself to hurt *Hannibal*, that he didn't move.

Let him die there, let him faint. Let his body consume itself for energy - a cannibal at last.

He withdrew his eyes from Hannibal, staring at the ceiling instead - hoped the rebuff would make him skitter away in that graciously undignified way of his.

For a moment, Hannibal was immobile by the threshold, and Will thought idly, for hunger brought him a tired form of optimism, that he was about to leave. He didn't. He closed the distance between them and gripped Will's arms forcefully, hoisting him up. Will's head spun, little white stars in the corners of his vision, and he weakly tried to bat Hannibal's warm hands away.

'Don't be difficult, Will,' Hannibal chastised, bringing one of Will's arms to wrap around his neck and looping his waist for support. There was a stewing heat in his words, in his voice, and Will smiled to himself, feeling the invisible touch of Hannibal's impatience, the ragged edges of his self-control.

He wanted to toy with it; he wanted to make Hannibal yell at him. He wanted the man crushed, devastated, riddled with despair.

And he knew, proudly so, that all those pretty scenes were within reach: were he to get a little slimmer, were he to keep his silence and his love, and Hannibal's spirit would break somewhere.

Hopefully irremediably.

A lovely scar.

He bit his tongue not to grunt as Hannibal guided him downstairs, his scent overwhelming, his warmth everywhere. And Will wanted to sneer, feeling the itch in Hannibal's fingers - for the man was touch starved, Will found; grip tight in his waist, bringing their hips together, fingers crawling to the ridge between his shirt and pants, chasing bare skin; and his other hand, the one not on his waist, was a featherlight press to his chest, a flimsy excuse - to keep Will from falling, he'd say - for touch; and furthermore, his face was angled instinctively toward Will, nose leveled with Will's ear, the subtlest sound of a whiff as he inhaled Will's scent.

Will had already achieved despair, then. As they went down the stairs and toward the sitting area, Hannibal was the picture of stolen intimacy, of wanton closeness - how funny to think

they'd both been starving in their own ways.

Of course, Hannibal was the first one to get his fill. Will was still horribly hungry and Hannibal, the stag, was devouring.

When they got close enough to the couches Will disentangled himself from Hannibal, not even sparing him a look There was lovely power in denying him, when he saw him wanting. He sunk into his corner, curled contently. Looked out the window, away from Hannibal - dismissing.

'You're behaving childishly,' Hannibal stated, spiteful.

Will hummed absent-mindedly, eyes locked on the blinding baby blue.

Hannibal sighed eventually and went about his business. But he lurked, and he was a present flurry: crisscrossing up and down, half an hour in his office, half an hour lingering beside Will, sitting, standing, looking at him with a concerned frown, the kind that bled into anger - how he looked like he wished to forcefeed Will, to crush his windpipe until he yelled, to then greedily kiss the sound away. Bursting with desire, while Will imploded.

Will spied, mostly. It was a good time to start understanding Hannibal's habits, after all. Sometimes, when he went upstairs, Will would venture to the bathroom or give in to boredom and nap for a little while.

It soothed the pain in his stomach, at least.

Dusk creeped in, and Hannibal came downstairs. Winston, already trained, hopped from the spot where he was lounging beside Will on the rug and ran to the front door. And Will raised his head, because there it was - doors, locks, keys -, and Hannibal was taking that glistening keychain off the pocket of his slacks and opening the door, the blur of a substancial amount of keys shining on the little ring, and watching Winston trot off happily.

He returned the keychain to its place - Will was begining to believe they were always, *always* on his person - before turning to walk towards Will.

'I will begin preparing dinner now. You'll eat tonight, Will,' he said, all domineering, like he still had any shred of that past doctor's authority.

Will simply raised his eyebrows. He'd eat, if Winston ate too.

And still, he could keep going; yes, in his mind it seemed so sweet: he'd keep going and going, starving so silently for Hannibal, killing himself for him to see.

It had the most depressing appeal.

If he died, Hannibal would never get over it. It was possibly the worst way he could hurt him, which made it undeniably enticing.

But no, he wouldn't die.

If he died, he couldn't gloat. He craved a future where he could look into the mirror and see a survivor.

Hannibal indeed went to prepare dinner, disappearing into a whirl of scents and swirls of smoke. Will watched Winston gallivanting outside, a silhouette outlined by dark oranges.

He wondered if he'd find a mouse again. Idly, he felt some regret over having left his book upstairs.

There were only two plates at the table. Nothing for Winston. Hannibal stared at him expectantly, one perfectly groomed eyebrow raised.

Will sighed. The plate went on the floor. He went upstairs.

Two more days passed in a blur, and Hannibal seemed more and more flustered. Clearly he hadn't been expecting Will to hold on for that long; a brief lesson, he'd thought; a dirty negotiation to retrieve Will's voice.

But Will was resilient. It was worryingly simple to neglect himself if the reward was upsetting Hannibal.

He was okay.

He could do it.

When the seventh day dawned he was as determined as ever. Hannibal brought him down to the couch with his possessive touches, his furrowed brow, and fussed over him at a short distance.

Will was lulled to sleep by the whimpers of his stomach, by the pictures of arm eating leg, chest eating neck - his body opening its jaws to swallow itself in.

By lunchtime, Hannibal broke.

He'd placed his plate on the floor like always, struggled a bit to kneel and get back up; but he'd done it, and he'd just turned to get back to his lovely couch when he heard the frenzied clinking of cutlery and a chair dragging through the floor.

Hannibal's hand was on his shoulder, and Will froze.

'Eat, Will.'

Will breathed out shakily. It wasn't time. Hannibal had to *apologize*.

He tried to brush Hannibal's hand off but it clamped down, forceful, and his other hand settled on his waist, pushing, persuading him to turn: Will, weak, legs already wobbly, went willingly, facing Hannibal with determined eyes.

'You are jeopardizing your health unnecessarily. It's about time this stops, don't you agree?'

Hannibal's eyes were searching, his hands still grabbing onto Will, and Will noticed at last the little discomfiting details in Hannibal's appearance: his hair wasn't combed with the same rigor, the collar of his shirt was crooked, and there were dark circles under his eyes - had he been sleeping? had he visited Will during the night again without him even noticing, watching out for him? And Will knew that he had, he could see it in the tired lines of his features: he'd stood throughout the night, or perhaps sat cross-legged at the edge of the bed, making sure Will was okay, laying longing gazes over his shrinking body, touching through fabric, revealing his despair to an unconscious face.

Hannibal had been broken for a while now.

'It was rash of me, perhaps,' he was saying now, cautious words, reluctant yet resolute; how mesmerizing it was to see Hannibal displaying his regret.

The stag bending before him. The antlers bowing in shame. Will, delirious, *fascinated*, stepped closer to the beast, and Hannibal breathed in heavily, his fingers entwining impulsively behind Will's back, locking him between his arms, pushing him closer in this plea for attention.

'I apologize,' he murmured softly, eyes darting between Will's, the subtlest moment of humility, 'I'm sorry, Will,' and he was bringing their chests together, slowly, a light press of bodies, his head resting against the side of Will's.

Will wasn't sure of what to do.

The apology swirled in the air around them, lightened their embrace with the possibility of a clean slate. His condition was met: Hannibal had folded. He'd won the battle, and hoped for the ring of bells.

But they didn't come. Because he didn't know if it'd make him weak: was he supposed to eat now, to speak now, to move on to the next bloodshed? Excluding food or water or sleep whenever Hannibal was unreasonable?

He didn't know. There lingered the urge to never give in, to be cold, to *hurt*.

He tried to push Hannibal away - Hannibal held him tighter, hands digging into the small of his back, and he pressed his lips just above Will's ears.

'Eat something, Will. Please, sweetheart,' and the request seemed so urging, this frantic ache to *persuade,* that Will wanted to give in.

He thought: he should. He should grab his plate and eat. There was strength in advancing to the next battle. There was strength in *moving on*.

So he nodded, his ear brushing Hannibal's lips, and attempted to dislodge himself again; this time, Hannibal let him, bending swiftly to pick up Will's plate. He helped him onto the chair, all useless touches and hovering mouth, and then settled behind him with his hands on Will's shoulders, squeezing lightly, curved just enough that his nose was close to Will's curls.

Will didn't know what the dish was. There was a protein, an artful assembly of vegetables. He looked at them in unfocused vision, fingers hesitant around fork and knife.

It had been seven days.

He felt - strangely, twistedly - that he simply wasn't *meant* to eat. All these hours of repeating it to himself, his religion, his God of Deprivation, and the words still hammered in his skull - don't; not yet; hold on a little longer.

It didn't feel right.

And Hannibal was squeezing his shoulders harder, coaxing him on:

'That's it, Will. Come on.'

The first mouthful didn't feel like anything.

The second was terrifying in its euphoria.

Like a void had opened inside him; like his stomach, thin, dormant, had awoken with the fire and coal of industrious hunger, and it spread a toothed mouth to gulp down everything Will gave it.

He felt about to die. His body has forgotten food, and in overwhelming frenzy his heart would stop. Or his body would keep eating itself still, so fond of human flesh, and he'd shrink and shrink to a bag of bones and a melted mind.

But he didn't die. He kept eating, and Hannibal had leaned down fully now, burying his nose in Will's curls to give him an infinity of congratulatory kisses, little things of soft noises, as his hands trailed warmly from shoulder to collarbone.

'My love, how I've missed you. How I've worried,' he said, all hot, wanton words that Will barely paid attention to, 'Speak to me, darling. Please, Will, let me hear your voice.'

He felt lightheaded - nauseous but ravenous. And it made him weak, and he wasn't sure: should he speak now? should he end his votes of silence? He'd have to eventually - it had been his plan, hadn't it? An organic progression?

He could speak. Entirely justified. Feign acceptance, lower Hannibal's guard.

He could speak.

But once more, it didn't feel like he was *meant* to.

He heard Hannibal's knee hit the ground then - the man was half kneeling by his side, this engulfing presence to his left, his lips seeking Will's neck, a hand on his thigh and another on his back.

'Please, my dear, my sweet boy, it's been so long.'

It had. So long.

Days and days of muteness, of repetitive monologues inside his mind.

He missed it.

With Hannibal plastered to his side, under chaste yet urgent kisses, his throat quivered. Wistful.

He laid clear, tired blue eyes on Hannibal, on the man kissing him in vulnerable pleads, and allowed himself to crumble too.

'Hi.'

Rasp, rough. It hurt.

Hannibal looked as if he'd seen a miracle.

'Hello, Will,' he said, tone reverent, perplex; and the sincerest smile graced his face, and in his eyes shone a moist layer, and he was devout parents in their child's communion, he was Moses as he received the commandments.

The dining room faded: they were in Mount Sinai, orange dirt and blue skies behind them, Egypt's heat on their skin, and Will sat on a rock as Hannibal kneeled before him - all because of one word, and Will felt, for one sunkissed moment, like God.

---

Days passed.

Will felt better.

There was red in his cheeks now; a renewed edge to his thinking.

And he spoke. A little bit. Short sentences to oil his voice-box. Brief things that made Hannibal smile.

Winston's food had been restored to its proper cupboard. None of them mentioned it. Hannibal acted more tentative, but it wasn't regret: more like eagerness.

Will was downstairs often.

He watched.

And those damn keys never came out of Hannibal's pocket. Ever.

It was impossible to get them. At night, Will was locked in his own bedroom, unable to do anything; during the day, he could never get close enough to Hannibal to swipe them - and even if he did, Hannibal would surely notice before he could do anything with them. When Hannibal was showering he locked the door to the bathroom. When he left for supplies in his truck, Will was tidily dispatched to his bedroom.

He didn't know what to *do*.

And the helplessness made it difficult to linger downstairs, spying that ridiculous fortress. A house - a *simple* house - and he couldn't leave. Were he to break the window and Hannibal would hear; and if he didn't, was he supposed to walk idly and hope for the best? If he followed the road, Hannibal would quickly find him; if he didn't, he risked wandering into nothingness.

He needed that keychain, and he needed to distract Hannibal for long enough to escape.

That day he'd thought of barely anything else. At ten o'clock, as he laid down on the couch with Winston dozing off half on top of him, he decided he couldn't deal with it any longer: he got up, carefully rearranging Winston's limbs to rest on the pillow, and waved softly at Hannibal who was lounging in the armchair beside him:

'I'm turning in.'

Hannibal raised his gaze from the book he was reading and smiled, nodding once.

'Have a goodnight, Will.'

Retreated in his bedroom under the dim light of the bedside lamp, Will changed his clothes and slid under the covers. After a moment's consideration, he picked up his book.

There was no reason to save it anymore - he could ask Hannibal for a new book later. He could read, *really read*, and it felt like indulgence as he opened the copy and dove into the story with a commitment he'd refrained from feeling in the past, when he tried to read no more than ten pages a day. The most soothing aura settled round him, nocturnal cotton and warm orange light, swallowed in linen and feathers with the distraction of a different world to dwell in.

He felt content for a little while.

It didn't last long.

Because the book unrolled before him, and there came Julia and Winston, there came the Big Brother and their private revolution, and nothing worked - *nothing* worked - and then came the third act, and Winston - because that's how the world is - got caught, and the warm fuzz of reading evenings faded into empathetic dread as he played out pages, coloured Winston's tortured form, chipped the government cell, felt the electroshock machine, and became the mind of that oppressed man, brainwashed to hug his torturer, stolen of his morals, of his rebellion - the little man that dreamt of rats. Oh, and he went trough to the end - and it wouldn't go well, no, no -, and it didn't, and Winston didn't get his memories back, and the

government wasn't overthrown, but he didn't die either - and Will wished, in some poetic way, that he had - because the alternative was this hollow man and rule abider, a cog in the machine, and the book ended and Will stared at the final page and remembered its first where an independent man was introduced, a man that *thought* and now - now and forever - what was he but a propaganda pamphlet?

With the book finished, its scenarios crumbled. Its backgrounds fell but Will, under those now suffocating covers, still felt like Winston - and he *had* been Winston all along, hadn't he? What was he destined for if not Winston's ending? What was Hannibal but his own personal Big Brother? He was the same character in a subtler context; walking the same path in less evidence: except he was *worse* than Winston, because Winston had fought, he'd *tried*, and what had Will done? He'd discarded plans on the off chance they wouldn't work - he'd *cowered*. He was less than Winston, and still they'd meet the same fate - their ideologies vanished, and they'd *accept*.

And how weak he was; not even torture was needed, just isolation, just a persistent sales pitch and a steady hand to feed him, and he *softened*; why hadn't he hurt Hannibal? He could kill him. He could try. But no, this hideous attachment denied it, this foolish *respect*, and there he was, a stupid child, waiting for his mind to be rewritten, for his resolve to erode into compliance.

The thought came, that poetic streak from earlier, when all of him was literary justice: he should die.

He should die in some tragic way that proved his rebellion.

He should die, if it came between death and acceptance.

Will shook his head, throwing the covers away from him. His skin burnt, his mind struggling inside himself. How he wished to fall off that teasing window, to land far down between shards and blood, to crawl and die somewhere between the tall grass.

But he couldn't.

Because Will had never liked death.

Because he'd seen it countlessly through others' eyes and never had those victims looked victorious.

No. Death was the last resort. He hadn't fought enough. He'd felt the spirit of the defeated - through Winston, in that small cell, strapped to that table - and he wasn't there yet. He had more left in him.

It was a selfish war: he fought only for himself, for the existence of Will Graham. But it was a worthy war, and he'd fight.

He'd try.

And courage came hand and hand with stupidity - the rash rush that makes humans *move* - and Will stood, and his posture was a soldier's; he left the room, and down he went through the stairs in a march, but there was something less than human in him, there was the sheer focus of a weapon, because there was only one thing that distracted Hannibal, one thing that made him weak, and that was Will himself.

He didn't bother lightening his footsteps; he reached the ground floor and beelined to Hannibal, still reading as he'd been left, his back to the stairs. And he walked decisively right to the side of the armchair, right until Hannibal looked at him, surprised, and then the noise inside him stopped.

He felt himself panting. He wasn't sure if that was real. It all felt so stupid now that he was faced with Hannibal's stare. What was he to do? What was his plan?

But there was a blind determination in Will, and something within him snapped - or, perhaps, was fixed - and in one swift movement he was straddling Hannibal, hands on each side of his face as he pulled him into a kiss.

It felt like the sweetest declaration of war.

Like Hannibal's lips drenched in blood would be the most beautiful thing in the world.

Hannibal was tense still under him; his chest, pressed against Will's, had not one twitch of muscle; one of his hands held his book, the other was frozen in the armrest; his lips were unresponsive.

It was a lot like kissing marble.

An exquisite Greek statue, maybe.

Will licked Hannibal's bottom lip, then bit gently - and there it was, Hannibal's free hand instantly gripping his hip.

He withdrew, breathing into Hannibal's mouth, searching any hint of distrust in his dark eyes.

There was none - pupils blown, astonishment; nothing more.

Then, the dry blood irises came to life once more; they skittered frantically all around Will's face, trying to understand.

'Will...' the man whispered, and that unsure tone felt delightful.

'I didn't say goodnight,' he said back, words hushed, because it seemed like a properly vague excuse.

Hannibal's hand had slithered to the small of Will's back, resting there hesitantly, like he feared doing anything that could make Will leave.

'No, you did not,' he said, still in that unusual mix of bewilderment and confusion, 'May I ask...'

'Don't.'

Will kissed Hannibal again, a brief, forceful thing to stress his point: he didn't want questions; he didn't have answers.

'Will,' Hannibal called out again in that enticingly wistful voice, chasing Will's lips, 'Darling.'

Will wrapped his arms around Hannibal's neck, pressing them further together. It felt darkly exciting, this kind of power: this control he had in his boldness, this desire he could elicit from Hannibal so easily.

He felt powerful, and that urged him to grind just a little against Hannibal, pressing a hot kiss to the corner of his mouth.

'Hannibal,' he moaned back, perfectly mimicking that wanton tone.

And Hannibal, because he'd never heard Will whisper his name in pleasure, in lust, sprung into frenzied action, a spilling heat - his book fell on the ground and he placed both hands on Will's hips, fingers spread greedily, letting them then travel to the swell of Will's ass before bringing their lips together once more.

It was the first time that Will dove willingly into these passionate kisses; the first time that, at the prod of Hannibal's tongue, he immediately opened his lips and answered with his own, a swirl of tongues, a graze of teeth, messy and open and entirely needful.

Will tried to push into the kiss but his chin was grabbed; his face was pulled away, cradled in Hannibal's hand, and Hannibal was stopping to simply *look*, eyes so moved, nearly tearful, and Will marveled at the sight of the weeping stag.

'In my most beautiful dreams,' Hannibal murmured, 'this is what I dared to picture. For so, so long...'

Will brought their foreheads together.

'How long?'

'Ever since I first saw you in Jack's office. The look in your eyes - you were unlike anyone I'd ever met,' Hannibal spoke clouded, as if remembering the moment in vivid detail, 'You were above the entire world.'

Will didn't know what to respond; how could he answer in lies? Hannibal's tellings were sweet poetic honesty, and no lie could convincingly match it.

He settled for the simpler choice: he ground down firmly, their crotches aligned, and released a partially fabricated moan. Hannibal shuddered under him, canting his hips up, grip on Will's chin tightening.

'I love you, Will.'

It was heartbreaking, how true it felt.

Will breathed out, dipping into the pearly fondness in Hannibal's eyes.

'I know.'

And he kissed him once more, a gentler thing, for in all his fury, all his bloodthirst, there was pity - Hannibal opened himself for view, thinking Will had asked to see.

They slid into a slower pace; their hips stilled, their fingers tracing errant patterns over the other's shirt. Will remembered another moment, the plane, where he'd been nestled in Hannibal's lap, drugged and helpless - it felt different now, a little rush of power, the knowledge that it was a scheme - that it was, in the end, nothing but a ruse to escape.

And if the faint feeling of sharp bits pricking at his inner thigh - the keys, those perfect keys in Hannibal's pocket - made him kiss harder, touch Hannibal with renewed interest, then it was all for the best.

It was pretense. Stealing an inch of Hannibal's lust, accessing his own - it wasn't weakness, it just made it all the more believable.

Hannibal's hand had strayed from his cheek, dancing now across his chest; a teasing thumb grazed his erection. Will could feel the man's smirk against his own lips.

'Should I help you with this, dear?' he said, bolder fingers coming to cup Will's hardness.

'That's the plan,' Will gruffed out, and he wanted to laugh; it was the plan, technically, but things needed to be in order, 'We should get to a bed.'

Because Will intended on thoroughly tiring Hannibal, on hopefully convincing him to fall asleep beside him, and he'd doubtfully achieve that on an armchair.

Hannibal, whose wonder at Will's responsiveness stood undiminished, nodded promptly. Will felt him slide his hands down to his ass:

'Allow me to carry you.'

Will raised his eyebrows, shifting in Hannibal's lap.

'I doubt that'd be safe.'

'I believe I'd manage,' Hannibal smirked; then, his eyes shaded sharper, a dark humour lacing them, 'I have carried bodies before, Will.'

And Will's first instinct was to laugh; the smallest chuckle, a breezy and relatively guiltless little thing. Something in Hannibal lightened - this fear, perhaps, that Will's acceptance had boundaries: a wanting for the man, but an exclusion of the monster.

Will thought it was a ridiculous thing to be insecure about. Hannibal and the stag were indissociable.

Still, for good measure, he pressed a quick kiss to his lips before climbing off, disentangling himself from Hannibal's arms.

'Let's go upstairs,' he said, and an irresistible warmth grew in him as he looked back at Hannibal, childlike smitten in his own way, and a brightening of relief at seeing Will's continuing initiative.

Will chose his own bedroom, thinking it was the less suspicious choice. Hannibal followed closely, shutting the door behind them.

He stood, breath heavy, slacks obscenely tented, waiting.

Will swallowed. His nerves blustered wickedly against the innerside of his skin. He felt like he was vibrating, and he hoped it came across like eagerness. He closed the distance between them with a step, placing his hands on Hannibal's chest - a sign, a demand.

Hannibal found his eyes for an instant, assessing; then, he plunged into a kiss.

Will struggled to keep his hands poised where they were, smothering the instinct to repel - striving for the picture of newlywed eagerness, impeccable resolve.

Hannibal's nimble fingers found the first buttons of Will's shirt. He stilled.

'May I?' he asked, like an afterthought; and it was kind, this effort to mantain Will's control - but it was selfish too: he was terrified of the idea of Will running; of losing the lovely progress in his project.

Will considered, then shook his head.

'Wait,' he said before grabbing the hem of Hannibal's sweater and tugging it up; it felt better to see Hannibal undress first - this way, he wasn't offering fragility, only returning.

The sweater fell on the floor with a soft sound amidst the heated air; muffled, like their ears had shortened their spans to only hear each other - nothing else mattered in that little room, with the shutters closed, the furniture insufferably still.

Hannibal's chest still had that morbid allure he remembered: plains of skin, patches of silver-gold hair; and under it, a working of discreet muscles, of dark discipline, ready to prowl, to lunge, to hurt.

'Will.'

Will looked up from his musings. Hannibal was staring, exhaling, eyes unsure, frustrated at his prolonged inaction.

So Will complied to the request laced in that low calling of his name, and laid a tender kiss in Hannibal's collarbone, fingers coming to travel across the expanse of naked skin.

'You don't have many scars,' he said. He'd expected more; some relieving proof of a past inexperience.

'No,' Hannibal replied, and his voice was rough, wanton, 'Will,' he repeated, grasping Will's collar again.

Will nodded, aiming for absent-mindedness as he planted a few more kisses along Hannibal's clavicle, noting the low moan they elicited: really, there was no reason to still feel uncomfortable at baring himself to Hannibal - he'd done it often enough - but it still felt too revealing, an ill-thought jump from an unknown cliff.

With Will's permission, Hannibal worked quickly on the buttons of his shirt, discarding it hastily on the floor. And there were his hands immediately palming skin, his mouth rushing to suck on the juncture between neck and shoulder.

'We should... bed,' Will rasped, tightly gripping Hannibal's sides.

They came stumbling backwards until Will's legs hit the bed and he fell, Hannibal bracketing his head with muscled arms.

Their chests pressed together in maddening heat; Hannibal's hand came promptly to undo Will's jeans, hand digging cruelly into his dick in the process.

'Fuck, *Hannibal*,' Will groaned, instinctively bucking into the contact.

'Hush, sweetheart, it's just a moment,' Hannibal offered with an obviously pleased smile, not making an effort to relieve the pressure as he undid the button and zipper. Then, he got off the bed to swiftly remove Will of the remainder of his clothing, leaving him unceremoniously naked.

Will didn't feel embarassed. He felt uncomfortable in a squirming way that implied no shame; it wasn't his nakedness specifically, but the effect that he knew it had on Hannibal.

'I don't,' Will chuckled, a small defence, 'I don't really know what we should do.'

Hannibal kneeled back on the bed, legs at each side of Will. Will moved up on the bed so only his feet surpassed the edge; spread out completely, curls straying on the mattress, surrounded in pretty white and soft covers.

'What do you want us to do?' Hannibal asked with an amused smile, clothed crotch rubbing so frustratingly against Will's erection.

'I don't know,' Will insisted. Then he rose on his elbows, searching Hannibal's eyes to offer them a look of reassuring heat, 'A lot of things.'

Hannibal smirked - delighted, a brimming joy he tried to conceal in the back of his head, away from his composure - and kissed Will briefly, nibbling on his upper lip.

'Humour me, please,' he rasped, an inch from Will's mouth.

'You just want to hear me say something,' Will rolled his eyes, but let a tilted smile form so Hannibal could see it - there was care too in not seeming too docile; Will was puppeteering himself, moving the strings in the most fluid, realistic motions.

'I've always wished to unveil your desires,' Hannibal spoke low against Will's lips, pupils so focused on him - drinking him in, *drowning*. And to Hannibal's expectant, evidently hopeful stare, Will folded.

He reached for Hannibal's erection slowly, stroking him through the soft fabric of his slacks, obscene blue peeking through eyelash rows.

'I want to touch you,' he said in the tone of the gentlest offer, the most altruistic suggestion; because it was true - it meant much more to Hannibal than it did to him.

And Hannibal dissolved into a long exhale; unfurling, rocking into the contact, pressing Will further onto the bed. This statement - this confession - reverberated too in his spirit, an explicit proof of Will's agreement; after an eternity of unrequited love, there was finally a visceral, unmistakable token of returned affection.

Will could glimpse at the immensity of feeling inside Hannibal's head; it rendered him unable to do much other than pant onto Will's shoulder in thoughtful bliss, bucking into Will's solicitous hand.

Such a reaction stemming off deceit. Will wrongfully conducted the scene, leading a dance toward a well.

It made him eager to move faster; to plunge sooner.

'Hannibal,' Will whispered, tracing lightly down the outline of Hannibal's cock, 'You should take your pants off.'

Hannibal drew out a guttural sound; he discarded his slacks in precise swipes of hand, barely detaching himself from Will in the process. He hovered always near, impossibly constant. And Will could envision the keychain now laying innocently on the floor, hidden amidst fabric, and how easy it'd be to grab if Hannibal dozed off.

'Will, darling,' Hannibal doted, and he caught Will's wrist gently as it neared his erection once more, 'Swetheart, wait.'

And he was moving up on the bed, head resting on a pillow, laying down with his broad chest up and his dick pointing toward his stomach with a red and shiny tip. He offered Will a hand, wordlessly guiding him to straddle his thighs.

'Like this, so I can see you.'

And his eyes were glazed over with the precocious nostalgia of someone viewing a mesmerizing sight; Will saw, in an almost voyeuristic urge, a flash of his own beauty through Hannibal's eyes.

He looked down at the task at hand. Smiled slightly, a bashful little tilt.

'I've never done this before, actually. I'm not sure what to do.'

'Should I show you?' Hannibal inquired in a seductive purr.

Will nodded. It felt like a relatively mindless alternative to figuring it out on his own - he didn't want to actually *strive*, out of his own head, to pleasure Hannibal.

He feared what pathways that'd create. What doors that'd open.

Hannibal was encircling Will's hand with his own, molding them both around his erection.

Smooth strokes, up, down, a twist in the wrist. Techniques he'd used on himself in blurry nights; tricks Hannibal had used on him in the late weeks.

'Just like this, Will, just as I've done to you, just as you yourself like most,' Hannibal went on in heated whispers, and his accent deepened to an inarticulate string of words with his arousal, all rough curls and groans, 'Just as I'm showing you, my sweet boy.'

His hand loosened, and Will continued the rhythm. It was strangely hypnotic to see himself engaging in such an intimate act with Hannibal; erasing his head, the conflict there, and seeing only his bare body, they were both lust, both broken greed; imprisoned in this dichotomy, never quite behind bars, never fully out.

But Hannibal was simpler logic, delving into a dilettante's mindset: gone were the clinical thoughts and with them the edge that could ruin Will's plan; there was only romantic exacerbation of sensations into unwritten poetry; only polar opposites of feelings; only red and gold, divine, the consuming of a ripe love.

'You do this only with me, Will,' Hannibal said, his hands now splaying over Will's spread thighs, running down the sweaty skin possessively, 'I am the only one you give pleasure to,' - and Will refocused his efforts on his work - 'and the only one from whom you receive pleasure, ' - and Will cruelly remembered his own erection bobbing in the air as Hannibal thrust his hips up into Will's hand - 'Now and forever, the only one.'

'Fuck, Hannibal,' Will moaned out, instilling the words with every instinctive drip of lust he had, 'Yes, the only one.'

Hannibal's cock was dripping in his hand, swirls of precum in his palm every time he swiped around the tip. He wondered if he should pick up the pace or tease a while longer; then again, he was begining to doubt any simple handjob would be enough to convince Hannibal to fall asleep beside him afterwards.

It felt like a crack in his plan. And it terrified him - the thought that all his efforts, though ultimately born of some reckless impulse, had been for nothing.

Hannibal pushed himself up with one hand, all wanton urge, and mouthed at Will's neck; uncoordinated licks of tongue as his other hand dug into Will's inner thigh.

'Because you're mine, my good boy.'

Clenching his teeth, Will nodded. He flicked his wrist a little shakily, and Hannibal growled, nipping his skin.

'Yours,' he repeated at last in the same shaky way.

'And who am I to you?' Hannibal continued, such intensity in his voice, urgency in his narrative. The rhythm in his hips was faltering.

'What?' he frowned, focused as he was in quickening his strokes, tightening his grip to establish a more unforgiving rhythm, something to bring Hannibal to orgasm before his own mind went irremediably poisoned with this easy - almost natural, almost *right* - pretendings of love

'Come on, sweetheart,' Hannibal rasped, leveling their heads to lock eyes demandingly, 'You're my little boy, and who am I to you?'

Will's frown deepened. What on *earth*... - but then it came, Hannibal's delusions, his dreamt dynamics of little nicknames; the roles, the caretaker, the boy, and who was he? Oh, it was overused, and strangely unrefined for Hannibal in its own sexual kitch, but it was quite obviously the word he longed for.

'I'm not going to say it,' he said with disbelieving chuckle.

Hannibal opened his mouth, then closed it as a particularly broken sound overcame him at a stronger tug.

'Why not?'

'Because it's cliche,' and this time he tried to muffle his chuckle in the crook of Hannibal's neck, knowing that the man and its convoluted insecurities would most likely take offense.

'It may be,' a tad of disappointment, a little bitterness through the rough pleasure in his words, 'But it's true, isn't it?'

And Will might have said no, just to prod, but there were appearances to upkeep; and a little softness that saw Hannibal panting and arching under him, so close to the edge, sharing fantasies he'd confined in the depths of his mind, and wished never to let the man down.

'Yes,' he offered, right into Hannibal's ear, a compensation gift, 'Yes, it's true. You are.'

Hannibal's eyes widened, then fluttered as his body convulsed; and Will caught his lips in a firm kiss as he worked him through his orgasm, this unexpected crumble and curl of skin, spilling out in Will's hand with a litany of small moans and hisses that dove hot into Will's throat.

They rode out the orgasm together, frenzied rhythm quieting down to a slower stroking until Will finally relented, letting go of Hannibal's softening cock to gingerly place his come covered hand on Hannibal's chest.

'Good?' he asked.

Hannibal breathed heavily a couple of times, slowly coming down to life:

'Sublime,' he said, petting Will's sides. His arms wrapped around Will's neck, bringing him down into a kiss. Will went easily, laying on top of him, his own cock still hard and poking at

Hannibal's stomach.

He swiped away every thought of his own arousal; it was important, yes, in the name of spectacle, but he wasn't there for pleasure. Will had a goal - a makeshift goal of impulsive origins - and, seeing Hannibal's narrowed eyes, the weighing eyelids brimming with short silver lashes, it was a goal within reach.

It was late, Hannibal was elated and sated: why not suggest a nap? Let the man fall into a contented sleep in his bed; slip from his embrace and steal the keys.

It didn't seem unlikely. It could happen. It could.

Will moved to lay down to Hannibal's left, head neatly nestled in the curve between his neck and shoulder. Half draped on Hannibal's body, one arm stretched across his chest, he drew a tired, hopefully suggestive sigh.

Hannibal kissed the top of his head, finding Will's hand and entwining their fingers.

It was so strange, how it all felt so warm; their naked legs were entangled, their thumbs lovingly circling the back of each other's hand, and it felt delightfully addictive - a morbid peek into what could have been.

'Do you think I took too long?' Will wondered, looking up at him.

Hannibal's expression, before serene, furrowed as he contemplated Will.

'What do you mean?'

Will wasn't entirely sure.

'I mean, do you think I've taken too long to accept us? Would we be different, had I done it sooner?'

Hannibal hummed as he pondered the question. Will removed his hand from Hannibal's to draw soft patterns on his chest with an idle finger.

'Every time we speak in retrospect we think of different people. Who we were before and who we are now have never met, Will. And it does us no good to worry over the lives of strangers.'

'I know that,' Will sighed, raising his head to look more intently at Hannibal, 'But I still wonder.'

And it felt so reminiscent of their old sessions, when he spoke freely of guilty worries to a wiser ear.

Hannibal's gaze dissolved into understanding, a hand lifting to gently cradle Will's head.

'Any moment you chose would have been perfect. Our love does not change: all the strangers we've been have always been meant for each other.'

And he kissed Will, so sweetly, so sincerely, and for a moment it all felt *true* - and Will felt like he could so simply let it happen, give up on deceit and make it all *real*.

He didn't. He sighed and dropped his head. Hannibal carded fingers through his hair.

'Thank you for letting Winston out,' he said absent-mindedly.

'I know you care for him,' was Hannibal's short response, in the light-hearted tone of a shrug.

'You don't?'

It was hard in Will's mind to imagine anyone not being attached to Winston; such a pure heart, a simple mind, how was it possible?

Then again, Hannibal had never been too invested in innocence.

Hannibal smiled down at Will with a hint of amusement.

'By norm I don't usually care for living beings. You're the only exception, I believe.'

Will felt warmth bubbling inside him. It wasn't love, those terrible things Hannibal said - they were obsession, and egotistical need, and they rang truer than anything anyone had ever told him.

'Well, you should like him,' he deflected, 'He's a great dog.'

'He is,' Hannibal agreed, but his voice was reserved, polite, and Will narrowed his eyes to catch the slightest bit of contempt.

'You don't like him,' he exclaimed, surprised. He'd expected indifference, put-upon annoyance, but not an explicit dislike. He turned more to the side to fully observe Hannibal - his now subsiding erection poking at Hannibal's bare hip, and he had to steel himself not to jump.

Hannibal's eyebrows raised:

'Now why would I not like him?'

'Because *I* like him, and you want my world to be you.'

There was a small smirk in Hannibal's lips; humoured yet evasive.

'I do not mind that you love other things,' - a very lazy lie - 'I simply have never understood people's affection for dogs and other creatures.'

Will huffed. It was unconvincing: Hannibal was well acquainted with condescending fondness - that's how he regarded the world. That's how he seemingly regarded Will. And it was a rushed thing to say, but Will had the self-restraint to act a certain detached maturity:

'You call me a 'good boy', Hannibal. That's usually for dogs.'

Hannibal smiled mischievously, and Will knew he wouldn't partake in the same maturity he'd conjured.

'Are you implying that you're my pet, dear?' he said, lilts of innocence and suggestiveness in his tone.

It was ridiculous. Will rolled his eyes, lightly slapping Hannibal's arm.

'No, I'm saying the way you treat your supposed lover is not dissimilar to the way people usually treat their pets.'

Hannibal hummed, ghosting a teasing finger along Will's throat. His lips hovered close to his ear when he spoke:

'Perhaps I should collar you, then.'

Will's eyes widened. He drew a sardonic smirk; really, what else could he expect of that man? There were no boundaries to his sadism, no depth to his possessiveness.

'Do you want to?' he asked, testing. A little disbelief in his tone, enough to discourage a weak desire.

'I want to do everything to you, sweetheart,' Hannibal replied with a slow bite to his earlobe; his hand was settling low on Will's waist, heated, and Will chastised himself at the turn in the situation. Idle chat had become its own trigger, and they were straying from the indolent dozing of before.

'I'm tired,' he tried to whine, hating the petulance he instilled in his voice.

Hannibal chuckled dismissively, tongue adventuring down Will's jawline.

'Would you let me? Collar you, I mean.'

Will frowned - really, there was no downside to lying; it'd only seem to Hannibal as further proof of his changed feelings, if he said yes. But it didn't seem coherent to himself: he'd never liked to feel owned. And so, in this delicate balance between the two, he said tentatively, words quieted by the hand that had come to settle in a gentle grip around his throat:

'Maybe. Some day, if you wanted to.'

Hannibal purred, seeming delighted; and his cock was against Will's side, and Will realized with horror that it'd began to harden.

Was he supposed to reaffirm his tiredness, risk the suspicion of insisting on sleep? Or was he supposed to endure another round of borrowed emotions, and a conflicting mix of thoughts - some his own, some Hannibal's -, thrashing between sheets as he played his part for him?

'You'd wear it for me, my *good*, good boy?'

Hannibal's voice was pitched lower, and his hand was squeezing tighter. A part of Will wanted to simply nod in submission - get it over with - but he still feared too much acceptance would seem alarming; he was still himself, and there was a line.

'Not in public,' he said, defiance strangled by Hannibal's hand.

And Hannibal simply chuckled once more, like Will's little demands amused him - and that was a good thing, wasn't it?, that he didn't dwell too much over them; and he mouthed at Will's cheek, moving across to his lips.

'Yes, in public. If I asked, you would, wouldn't you?'

And because the pressure was begining to crush his vocal chords, a bitter strain in them, and his windpipe had gone meek and pliant under him so that air moved in the most desperate, useless flow, Will finally relented into a simple nod.

Hannibal's smile was devious.

'Good boy,' he praised hotly before attacking Will's lips, fingers finally withdrawing so that Will's first inhale of breath came directly from Hannibal's mouth - and it was primal, euphoric, this sharing of life, and Will kissed too, pushing into Hannibal's lips.

His plan had to be postponed. But perhaps it was better like this in the long run - he could spend Hannibal further, make sure he was too boneless to leave that bed, to defenceless in his delusions of won-over love to think about anything else other than embracing Will as they both slept.

'You haven't reached orgasm yet,' Hannibal stated as he ventured a hand to stroke Will's erection. Will nodded absent-mindedly, more focused on the maddening contact, the nimble fingers running up and down his length, 'Would you like to?'

'Yes,' Will answered readily, word drawn out in a wanton murmur. His skin was sweaty, burning, Hannibal half on top of him with incessant lips and fingers, and his cock was weeping from the prolonged neglect.

'Ask me.'

Hannibal's eyes were dark; commandeering. He gripped the root of Will's hardness forcefully, eliciting from him a shocked off moan.

'Please, Hannibal,' Will hated saying it, but he did, all sweet and desperate, to make Hannibal growl.

And then Hannibal was changing his position, getting fully on top of Will, strong thighs straddling him, and blatantly pressing two fingers to Will's bottom lip.

'Hannibal, what...?' Will sputtered, lips moving against the pads of those fingers.

'I'm going to ride you, my love. Now open up for me,' and Hannibal was slipping the pair of fingers into Will's wet mouth, unforgivingly far, gathering the slick from his saliva.

Will stood obediently, surprised, as his mouth was used. The first time Hannibal had done this, Will had bitten him. Now, he couldn't - quite the opposite, he forced himself to swirl his tongue around them, summoning a little moan.

'That's it, darling. So beautiful for me, perfect,' Hannibal cooed with hooded eyes, thrusting his fingers in and out for a while longer before withdrawing them. Will watched transfixed as he then moved them straight to his own entrance, hand disappearing behind his balls, hips tilted up for better access.

Hannibal stifled a small sound as he plunged those fingers inside himself. And he began moving them in and out before a second had passed, the subtlest crease to his frown as he worked himself open.

And Will was riddled with guilt. Because Hannibal was pure lust and want, and in this situation - this specific little context - Will was the deceiver. He could feel the echoes of Hannibal's enthusiasm, and knowing that it was born out of a lie twisted his heart. So he rushed up, looping his arms around Hannibal loosely, and craned his neck up for a deep kiss, trying to convey in it enough sweetness, enough makeshift sincerity to please both Hannibal and his conscience.

'God, Hannibal,' he rasped, and Hannibal answered with a groan as he slid another finger inside himself. It was insanely arousing, seeing Hannibal in all his predator glory, all rippling muscles and soft skin, silver hair glistening, a layer of sweat forming, rocking up and down on his lap - not submitting exactly, but allowing Will to indulge in a different kind of intimacy.

After all, Hannibal had always enjoyed leading Will to the edge of humanity.

An irresponsibly short amount of time went by before Hannibal was taking his fingers fully out and spitting crudely - and wasn't that, because it was *Hannibal* incredibly hot? - and coating Will's erection with the weak lubricant.

'*Hannibal*,' Will tried, voice breaking through the overwhelming stimulation, 'I don't think that's enough prep.'

'Trust me, Will,' Hannibal's voice was urgent and gruff, 'You may enter me now.'

His hand guided Will's cock into his entrance, right until the tip was pressing in. Then, he slowly moved down, swallowing Will in an excruciating tightness until he was fully seated in Will's lap once more.

Will managed a ragged breath.

It felt unreal.

The most encompassing heat, all around him, *burning*, compacting, tight and deep and it was *Hannibal*.

Hannibal who was staring in humble eyes, those heavy eyelids, the shining maroon; Hannibal who was brimming with his form of love, allowing Will inside him, a romantic fusion of bodies, as their minds had merged centuries ago.

And Will wanted to deliver himself fully to Hannibal. To admit to all his lies right there and obtain a blinding forgiveness; to live in idyllic psychosis.

But he didn't.

Because Hannibal had entered Will too. And he hadn't done it romantically, he hadn't done it right; he'd *desecrated*, because their relationship held not equality - Will was a toy God, and Hannibal worshipped as he pleased.

He didn't move away either, however. There was still a plan, still an order; and so Will tapped into Hannibal's arousal, drew in some to maintain his persona, and thrusted up into Hannibal, losing himself in the pleasure as he laid open mouthed kisses on Hannibal's sharp jaw.

'Hannibal, *fuck*,' he let out, a pitiful crack in the words, the sensations too overpowering. He'd been edging for too long - didn't know if he'd last.

'How does it feel, sweetheart?' Hannibal asked, begining a slow rhythm with his hips, in masterful rocks and rolls, using his body as a finely tuned instrument to pleasure Will.

'I- *God*, Hannibal, *incredible*,' he panted, meeting Hannibal's rocking tentatively - but Hannibal didn't seem in danger to break, and he moved down more firmly, urging Will to speed up.

'That's it, my love, take what I want. So beautiful like this. Every other partner, Alana, anyone else - no one can ever compare,' Hannibal was saying, hands on Will's shoulders for support, bringing their foreheads together in a heated share of breaths.

'No, never,' Will nodded madly, and it was true - he'd never felt anything like it, anything as hot, as tight; and knowing that it was Hannibal riding him so passionately, that it was Hannibal's hips his nails were sinking into made everything impossibly better, 'I won't last, Hannibal.'

Hannibal didn't slow down, his chest tense and glistening, the most ironic halo of yellowed light around his silver hair.

'So lovely, so perfect... How I love you, Will...' he murmured into his ear, and Will was pushed into the edge, teetering in it, so close to the fall.

And Will, in weakness, because romance dictated so - because melodies, symphonies, poems, they chanted for the same thing - let the dam inside him break, let his empathy spill in skyscrape waves, binding them together for one immaculate moment of immersion:

'I love you too,' he whispered back, a truth, a lie, and Hannibal's intake of breath, the way his hips stuttered, sent him off - he came with a bitten off scream, back arching, inside Hannibal.

The next few minutes were a haze of blurry notions and shaky movements. Hannibal's inner walls contracted in a quick rhythm, stretching his orgasm. He felt engulfed, enveloped, forever inside Hannibal. He'd never leave, ever, in his life.

It felt like, in their own way, inside their own story, the dog had finally swallowed the mouse.

He dropped fully on the bed with a groan, all of him sore, eyes closed. There were ghosts of words, gentle things, and a hand petting his stomach. Then, Hannibal got up - Will's dick sliding out with an obscene sound - and seemed to leave the bed.

Will, in a slow, abstract way, feared that Hannibal wasn't intending to come back - that he'd lock Will in his bedroom like every night; that it'd all have been for nothing. He laid motionless, eyes persistently shut, unwilling to face the emptiness of the darkened room.

He felt used. Cheap. Both guilty for his lies and somehow betrayed. Dipped in the impending disenchantment of failure.

Eventually, Hannibal returned. Will opened his eyes to see him, naked, coming to kneel on the bed, a wet washcloth in his hand.

Relief washed over. Selfish: hope for his plan. And then a smaller, shier thing, in the form of a genuine warmth for the man.

Hannibal began cleaning their skin with deft strokes. The cloth was soft, the water refreshingly cold.

'This was your first time penetrating a man,' Hannibal stated in his exquisite facade of distanced curiosity 'Did you find the experience enjoyable?'

Will rolled his eyes. There was a ghost of a smile in Hannibal's lips.

'Should I state the obvious?' he said with a raise of his eyebrow. Hannibal's smile grew, bright with pride, and Will softened, sighing as Hannibal ran the washcloth across his inner thighs, 'You've made yourself my first in every way.'

It wasn't accusatory. Mere observation.

'Not every way,' Hannibal corrected lightly, 'Some are still to come.'

And Will simply nodded, because inquiring further seemed pointless - Hannibal did as he pleased in his own idle games; Will would focus on winning his.

'I'm tired,' he said again, looking at Hannibal through intentionally heavy eyelids.

'I know, sweetheart,' Hannibal said with one final stroke of the washcloth, and leaned to fondly kiss Will's lips and cheek, 'You can rest now.'

And the moment had come.

The climax.

The crescendo in the silent deafness of the room, the white noise static; the sight he'd envisioned as he'd marched with a soldier's determination down the stairs. The plan, the game; the insidious strike you hope goes unnoticed.

Will breathed, grabbing Hannibal's hand before he moved away.

'Stay with me. Please.'

And he won - it was so evident in the awed look Hannibal gave him, the surprised stare.

He'd won, and he'd done nothing but let Hannibal sink.

'Of course, my love.'

Hannibal laid down beside him and gingerly pulled the covers over them. He settled closer to Will, on his side, and Will nestled his head in his chest, nuzzling lazily at the tip of his sternum.

Hannibal let out a contented breath, flinging one arm around Will, looping to pet slowly at his back. And Will relaxed as well, seeing how clearly at peace Hannibal was, how grateful he felt in that moment - he wouldn't bother locking the door, no; he wouldn't move if the world ended.

Will squirmed a little, turning and stretching to switch off the lamp on the bedside table. They were plunged into clear darkness, the half closed shutters letting in the palest moon beams.

'Did you mean it?' Hannibal asked in a lover's murmur, the tone of intimate confessions that only breathe at night.

Will sighed, assuming the man referred to his impulsive love confession.

'I think so,' he murmured back eventually.

It was genuine at least, the not knowing.

But Hannibal seemed satisfied with the answer, as he pressed a long kiss to Will's curls.

'I love you, Will.'

And Will didn't want to say it again - for words made things exist - so he settled by kissing the skin above Hannibal's heart.

'Goodnight, Hannibal,' he said, and closed his eyes.

---

Hannibal fell asleep a while later.

Will kept his eyes primly closed, his breathing impeccably slow. Not a ripple, not a turn - he was asleep for everyone to see.

He kept still even when he first saw that Hannibal was sleeping. In him lurked the fear that Hannibal was too pretending, having suspected Will all this time, letting himself be strung to see what would happen.

So he didn't move. Not for a long time.

And only when around an hour had passed, and Hannibal was still the perfect picture of ease beside him, did he dare to open an eye.

Hannibal was glorious in his sleep. With the moonlight gracing his sharp cheekbones, shading dark circles around his sunken eyes, he was the contrast of archangels in featherlight fury.

A dozing beast in his partner's arms.

A demon lost in dreams, showing his broken wings.

Will nearly gave up on everything; in the view of such docile innocence the thought of the violence laying dormant was livelier, helplessly grotesque - in Hannibal's slack lips he could better see the edge of his teeth, and he feared moving, were that bloody mouth to dig into his flesh.

But he did, eventually.

Slowly, careful not to rouse him.

Will disentangled himself in the softest of motions, taking time between each action, apprehensive to every little twitch in Hannibal's face. The moments stretched in a tense strain as he separated himself from every inch of that sleeping body, like a drop of molasses hoping to fall.

And when he was on the edge of the bed, all of him untouched, and everything suddenly seemed so *possible* - so *close*, his dream for weeks, through votes of silence and hunger, through hopeless rebellions and desperate glimpses at Hannibal's pockets, finally *there*, for him, this window to exit victorious and return to his own life -, and it all began to feel overwhelmingly too slow, every wasted second another torture of uncertainty, Will *sprung*.

He stood, hoping the soft undulating of the mattress wouldn't bother Hannibal, and padded down to the floor. Their clothes were bunched up in a messy circle, all shadeless pieces of fabric. Will quickly picked up Hannibal's slacks, and he smiled a disbelieving smile as he felt the weight of the keys: he reached into the pocket, removed the little metallic ring, and all of him was pure, transcendent relief.

And then Hannibal shifted. And Will, with a jump, moved as quietly as possible towards the door, opening it slowly.

He crossed the threshold and then stopped, unsure. Perhaps he should lock Hannibal in, a guarantee that he wouldn't be interrupted.

He nodded to himself and looked at the keychain, nerves creeping in on him - the keys to the front door and truck were pretty easily distinguished, leaving three other relatively similar keys. One to the garage, the others to their bedrooms, which had different locks.

Well, it wasn't that bad. Three keys.

He could do it.

The first key didn't work, but it didn't wake Hannibal either. And Will was confident, and the second key slid in perfectly and moved the lock with a whiny metallic click. Will smiled, closed the door completely and turned the key.

Click.

Lock.

He'd done it. And a strange kind of exhilaration was spreading through him; knowing he'd *contained* Hannibal, knowing he was *safe*.

He put on Hannibal's slacks, though they were a bit too long and hung a bit too loose. And he was crossing the hall toward the stairs, a death grip on the keys so every jut of metal sunk in his skin, when he heard it:

'Will?'

Loud, and alarmed, and *furious*.

Will's heart stopped, or perhaps it started beating so fast he couldn't feel it; he turned to look at the door, watching morbidly as the doorknob swung up and down.

And a moment later, terrifying in the house's nocturnal silence, a bang, an anguished creak of wood, the horrible sight of the door whining and bending.

Hannibal was throwing himself against the door.

Will ran down the steps, each loud thud an almost physical pain. He couldn't fail now, he couldn't be caught - he was so *close*.

'Winston!' he screamed as he reached the bottom step, looking wildly around the house. It looked haunted in the night, all deformed shades and ominous quietude.

'Winston, where are you?!' he screamed again, desperate, moving hesitantly toward the garage door under the stairs, voice breaking a little as another sound, louder and more violent than the others, came from upstairs.

He was terrified. If he saw Hannibal now, if he saw that man - that monster - free and after him, then he'd *die*; he knew it, he'd die, heart drowned in primitive fear, a shot of adrenaline,

too much to take!, because he was a man, a *civilized* man, and here he was running from lions, skittering away to avoid getting eaten.

And where was *Winston*? Where could he possibly be? Was he asleep? Where the *fuck* was he? Why was he gone now, why couldn't he come when he was called, so everything was fine and they could go off together, and they could run and leave and *escape*?

'Winston,' Will murmured; lost all hope, desperate, a broken whisper, pleading stare searching all around him.

Nothing came.

And Will clenched his teeth and *moved*.

He ran to the garage door and tried out one of the two other keys. The door clicked open smoothly on the first try - and there was a crash.

A crash. Followed by a bark.

Winston was upstairs, and so was Hannibal. And the door had finally come down.

And Will hated it, hated life and the way the world worked in half happinesses and full miseries, in punishment and reward, and how nothing could go perfectly right, because he was dashing into the garage and locking the door behind him - locked, *locked* - and Winston was out there, all uncomprehending sweetness, and he was abandoning him.

'Will!' Hannibal was screaming, his footsteps echoing down the stairs. Will searched blindly for a light switch, found it, turned it on and looked around at the garage with unfocused eyes. He could hardly see, he could hardly think.

Hannibal's fist banged on the door, startling him.

'Will, open this door right now.'

Will didn't listen. He scanned the walls in frenzied speed and found the switch to open the garage door; clicked it, felt a spring uncoil inside him as the sliding door scuttered in heavy metal sounds and began to trudge upwards; then he looked down at his hand - it was trembling, he thought - and found the car key, the button that turned the truck on.

From the half opened garage door a breeze flew, cold on his bare chest and feet. Hannibal was trying to break open the door in deafening sounds, the wooden material cracking and curving against his weight.

Will opened the driver's seat door, entered, closed it, turned the ignition key; the motor whirled to life, and he felt like crying.

The garage door wasn't fully open, but it was enough. Will put his weight into the accelerator, and the truck was moving, and he was *out*, out into that naked path he'd spied on through his window, under the starry skies of Italy.

He drove off through the dirt path, gaining speed, the feeling of the wheel in his hands unreal.

He was free.

His plan had worked.

He'd won.

He looked through the rearview mirror. The house was smaller.

It looked pretty, in the night.

And by the garage door stood Hannibal, hair ruffled by the breeze, chest heaving, petting Winston's head.

They stood there, watching Will go. Little silhouettes lost in darkness.

Will remembered the time he'd laid in his bedroom inside that house, under sticky yellow light, in a pretty afternoon, and he'd begun to form his plan. He'd pictured himself driving off with Winston by his side. He'd pictured himself screaming, victorious.

He was alone. And he drove quiet into the night, tears in his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaand the chapter's done! Yey, guys, you made it to the end~

Oh, and to anyone that thought it but wasn't sure, and just wants some confirmation, you know the little smutty bit where Hannibal asks 'Who am I?' He was looking for the word 'daddy'. Because we love some subtextual daddy kink, now, don't we? ;-)

Okay, hope you enjoyed, leave a comment if you'd like to suggest anything or ask something about the fic, and I hope I return with an update relatively soon!~ <3

# Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

We're back!

Hi! You might not remember me, because yes, I've been gone for two months, but I'm back! The fic is back! I finally finished this chapter!

I apologise for the long wait, but I'm here now! I've been editing all morning so I could post this on Saturday, since I thought that'd be best for you guys. It's around 18.000 words, so about a 1h 30min read, plenty of time to get immersed in Hannigram darkness and heartache~

Everyone that's here for the smut: I'm sorry, but you're going to find some plot development. It's a necessary evil, I couldn't do anything about it.

Everyone that's here to see Will being independent and powerful: this might happen. It's... debatable.

Everyone that's here to be overwhelmingly sad and frustrated: you're going to love this.

Alright, that's all I have to say, hope you guys enjoy it <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He found the ocean.

It was dark - the sky, the sand, the grass, the water, all black. But it sparkled clear sometimes, pale contours of the moon among the waves.

And far, across the sand, a row of wooden huts.

It could be a good place to sleep.

But Will didn't want to stop.

Because he'd been on that path for an hour. Drove, thoughtless, for an hour. And the path was dark, calm; the truck was small, and he was enclosed in metal, and he was safe.

The world was long. He could let the wheels turn and turn. He never had to leave.

And the huts would near closer and disappear behind his shoulder. The sun would rise and plunge back below. The ocean would change to land. He'd go from nature to town to nature,

and he'd never stop: his hands would never leave the wheel, and his foot would never leave the pedal.

Because Will's soul was one message, one purpose: run. Because he'd stood, fought, plotted, and he was exhausted. Because he'd been trapped for so long and now freedom stretched before him, so what could he do except seize every mile, except drive to the farthest point, the highest hill, away from that house, that place, that life?

All he wanted was to go - somewhere, no matter where. He wanted to move. Because when he stopped, when he *settled*, that's when he was caught.

But the fishing huts were coming closer, outlined beside the black sea.

They'd be a good place to sleep.

And maybe Will needed to stop.

Maybe the world wasn't generous. The loose ends weren't cut for the hero to escape untroubled - Will was out, but he wasn't dead. He wasn't dead, and the world went on - he couldn't roam forever next to the ocean; he couldn't be *thoughtless*. No, because the world went on and he had to sleep, and he had no food, no plan, no money, and the truck was low on gas, and *Winston* was still in that house, and so was Hannibal, and he'd run from the problem but the problem was still there.

Because in the end nothing was simple.

And Will didn't get to simply drive off.

So he slowed, scanned through the darkness for that straying of the path, and drove toward the water.

He turned off the engine and left the truck at the edge of the path.

Outside, it was cold.

He hadn't felt cold in a long time. He hadn't felt fresh in weeks.

The sand sunk under his bare feet; bits of dirt and grass prickled at the skin, grazing the hem of Hannibal's slacks. It felt unreal, this closeness with nature; indulgent even, and it upset him - how tamed had he been that normalcy seemed a privilege.

Will cut through the dunes and onto the beach. There the ocean stretched, all viscous and deep black like tar: sticking to the shore, wailing as it was dragged back.

He'd gone there for the huts. To rest.

But the ocean was there, and he seldom got to see it.

With a pondered gaze at the row of fishing huts to his left, Will went forward, almost to the edge of the sea, where spots of glistening foam dried into the sand.

And he stood there, and he wanted to charge on.

To dive into the ocean. To swim fast into the depths, head down and arms spinning, until Italy was a dot and he was dizzy in high sea. And maybe he'd drown - he'd sink, he'd die, of course he would - or maybe he'd cross the Atlantic in naked chest and full lungs, and kneel on some American beach with his cheeks red and a headache for his effort, and all it would take was swimming.

It didn't seem that bad, when he thought of it that way.

Out the Mediterranean, flung into the ocean, forward and forward.

And if he died, would it be so terrible?

He liked the water.

And he meant to step closer, to cut among the waves, but he stopped: the slacks would get wet, and were he to change his mind when he was already in the water, how would he dry them? He'd walk all night with them dripping down his legs.

Yes. He shouldn't.

It was probably best to turn back.

He set toward the huts. Sad shacks with broken boards. Some had padlocks, others abandoned with doors ajar.

He scavenged throw the easy ones first. Most of them were empty, with the exception of an old fishing rod and a t-shirt that had been used as an oil rag, then bundled tightly into a corner.

Will picked it up, nonetheless. And he *considered*. Because he had nothing - his life was nothing - and that, at least, was something.

He went back out, the breeze hard on his exposed torso. Looked around for a moment impatiently, brow furrowed: found a rock, sharp and grey, little minerals glimmering in the moonlight. Bust open the padlocks. And now there was a collection of good things, *decent* things, and a knot loosened inside him - there was a pair of boots, old, ragged and perhaps too small, but the years had stretched them enough that it wasn't uncomfortable; a plain black t-shirt and a raincoat resting on a hanger.

Lures. Fishing rods.

Hannibal had promised they'd go fishing.

And there were towels, and maybe Will could stretch one out on the soft sand, use the raincoat as a cover and sleep.

A peaceful hour to wash the adrenaline. Among salted breeze and black ease. Lulled by the sounds of the water crash.

He put on the t-shirt and the raincoat and carried one of the towels outside, laying down in front of the huts.

He closed his eyes. The wind ruffled his hair, tousles tickling his eyebrows.

It felt nice.

And Will was laying still.

And he settled, and that's how he'd gotten caught.

And he tensed, and his heart stopped, and he was *stupid* - what was he doing, out there, alone, like his escape was a right no one could steal? Like the world was perfect and it was irrevocable? Like he could never go back?

What the *fuck* was he doing?

Hannibal didn't have more vehicles, but he had a phone. And he had people, so many fucking *strings*, and he'd pull on one and moments later a car would be heading toward him, because he was Hannibal Lecter and he'd *asked*. And how far would these people be? Were they waiting - loitering - minutes away, standing idly by their doors, so eager to help? How long would it take for them to get to Hannibal? And once there, once at that *house*, what would happen? Hannibal would most likely make them drive around, make them search, or perhaps he'd go himself, so intent on finding Will - had he missed his chance, would he die now? And perhaps these people were driving right now, and they'd see the truck parked by the edge of the path and come investigate, and what could Will, in his too-small boots and with a rock in hand, do? He'd be taken *again*, and he'd never leave, because his plan had worked on the grounds of a hopeful trust on Hannibal's part, and this trust had now been forever shattered. No, he was done. No, of course there were already people driving, of course they'd seen the truck, and if Will *tried* he could hear their steps crunching the sand. Or maybe - maybe - Hannibal had called the police - a drunk in a truck had invaded his property - and policemen were coming for him right now in red and blue flashes, so close, already at the beach, ready to handcuff him and deliver him - finally, like he deserved - into the law. But it didn't matter how, and it didn't matter *who*, what mattered was Will was *stupid* and he hadn't *learnt*, and whoever it was had surely seen him by now, and if these were his last seconds should he even open his eyes to face them or should he rest for a final moment - or should he, doomed as he was, run into the ocean, liked he'd thought of, like he'd *wanted*, and be gone at least by nature's hand?

And Will was up but his eyes were still closed, and he could hear the footsteps, he could feel the hands that would grab him - and he stumbled, and he opened his eyes, and he was alone.

No one had come.

And Will looked at the waves rolling softly onto the shore, and thought:

It just means they're coming.

Because he could be losing his mind, but in Will's life paranoia paid off.

He was smart, and he knew Hannibal was smart too.

There'd be a plan in place. Perfectly oiled gears would turn, and over Beethoven's sonatas Will's demise would be constructed.

Will returned the towel to the hut and headed toward the truck.

---

The sun blazed high above the roofs and white walls.

Will remembered the name: Sapri. It'd been said by someone - the woman, Hannibal - in the plane.

That's where he was, he guessed.

But the houses were few, and the paths were lean. From the slope he'd parked in under a twist-branched tree, he saw people greet each other in the street.

It wasn't a town. Maybe Sapri was a village. Or maybe he wasn't exactly in Sapri - just around. In a little fishing community, all white paint, pebbles and rock: sea breeze and open markets in the square, windows everywhere to see the postcard picture Italy; and an eclectic sort of people strolling idly by the little paths, from tight-knit natives, older, humble in their fishing rods and wicker baskets, to dots of eccentric tourists, all breezy class and uncomfortable clothing, sunglasses and water bottles in hand.

Will could see why Hannibal had chosen it. Rustic, secluded - niche enough to be tasteful. It was both of them in one.

Will had spent the night watching it between heavy blinks and little yawns. He'd looked at the streets, at the sleeping buildings, leaning back on his seat, and pictured Hannibal's own strolls through the village. What houses he'd been in, what minds he'd festered on. And it felt already as if the subtlest perfumed string of corruption was winding itself round the place, an infection, sticky tendrils doomed to swallow it.

It was the brand Hannibal left. The design only Will could see. Wherever that man was - wherever he let the monster *breathe* - was broken when it left; he held people's hands up and up, sat them in the clouds for his dinners, for his evenings of idyllic lives, and he shut the door then - ruthless, *crack* - and everyone fell.

He liked to change things. He liked to make a difference.

And so Will had contemplated the houses, the streets, the slim trees, until dawn came in orange sunlight - and he'd committed the scene to memory, sure it would all soon enough seem entirely different.

He'd slept a bit too. Never too much, never too deep: intermittent dozing when things got too still. An hour, maybe, with all added up. He should have slept more, rested his mind, but he couldn't bring himself to unwind: it had been dark, and he'd felt, in that truck, in that foreign place, impossibly vulnerable, like at any moment someone could creep in amidst the night and force him out, and bring him back; and he'd replay it in horror in his head, the thought of someone hitting the windows, trying for the doors - so *close* to him, outside those walls of metal. And every time he saw it his muscles would tense, and his ears would perk. Like this he'd spent the night, swinging between semiconscious contemplation and delirious alert.

But it was day now. With sunlight and the beginnings of bustling below the world seemed less hostile. He felt safer, if only for there were people around to hear him scream.

And Will wasn't going to spend more time scared. Fear had to be pushed back from the forefront of his mind: a motivator whirling in the background, speeding his thoughts but not *obstructing,* because fear and sadness were quite alright, but only in a melancholic measure, something to dwell on later. Now, he needed to push all the doubts away. He needed to *focus*.

It was that thought that led him out the truck. It was that budding of shame - of disappointment at himself for not being *fast* enough - that made him move. He'd been hiding, unsure, like a startled dog testing the boundaries beyond his fence, so reluctant to run because he still felt that *collar* round his neck, but he could run, he'd done it already, and this waiting around was nothing more but the selfish hesitance of a Stockholm syndrome ghost.

He was out the truck. Boots crunching grass, fresh morning air. Past the fence, into open fields.

He turned to the village a little way down. People were filtering through the streets in languid pacing, everything warm and peaceful. As he walked down the slope to join them, Will felt almost normal, almost inconspicuous in his full outfit and foreign face - no one knew him, no one cared, and they'd see him as an unremarkable tourist, a shadow of a person.

He liked that. It felt, sometimes, like he was way too much inside too little.

Will meandered through the streets, hands in his pockets, and analyzed his circumstances. They weren't *bad*. He'd seen bad - he'd taught it in lectures. His were good. He had clothes, he had a vehicle. He'd scavenged a sum of twenty euros, as well as a folded map, from the truck's glove compartment. He was surrounded by people, by *witnesses*, which meant he'd be relatively safe.

It was good. It was a start.

But twenty euros wasn't much, it wasn't really anything. He needed food, and maybe gas, and it wasn't like he could just leave: Winston was still there and he couldn't abandon him - God knew what Hannibal would do to him - and for each day he lingered it was more food, more money, more risk.

It was ridiculous, really. He could get in that truck and drive somewhere, anywhere, as far as possible - reckless, impulsive, *reasonable*. But he stayed. Cohabited this little nesting of houses with Hannibal, because something in his stubborn mind refused to let him leave with this dubious victory - he would go with all the spoils, with no regrets, because he deserved a free conscience. But it was a terrible headache, and Will couldn't help wishing for that primitive urge of earlier to burn in him again. When he was flying down those stairs, locking doors under tremulous fingers, and he'd felt that blissfully simple narcissistic solution: save yourself. When it was all him and he was the world and the world just couldn't end, and he hadn't stopped for Winston - he wouldn't have stopped for anything.

It was different now. As he looked round the short houses for some small establishment he could eat in, the flight instinct in him was dulled. It all felt complicated in that slow way of distant problems; he had time to think, to plan, and that brought with it the burden of making good decisions.

There was no point in wanting differently, though, Will thought. He had to think, because he wasn't some scared little animal.

At least he wasn't just that.

He turned a corner to find a small round square, the left of it filled with little foldable tables. Wide windows, a striped banner on top of the open glass door.

A little cafe. It looked pleasant.

Deciding against sitting on one of the wooden benches outside, Will squeezed through the rows of chairs - a young woman and two old men glancing briefly at him from over the brim of their coffee cups - and entered the cramped establishment. It was all dark wood, a counter to the left and booths tucked against the right wall, the slimmest corridor in the middle for people to crowd themselves in.

Will liked it. It felt like the kind of thing engraved with nostalgia and cigarette smoke.

He sat on the farthest booth, shoulder against the wall, curled in the shaded corner. An employee came, and between broken italian and gesturing Will managed to order a coffee and some toast. Down the young man went, skittering through the narrow corridor and disappearing behind the counter, a routine of impersonal, distracted movements, and Will relaxed under this professional disinterest, this empty cafe of dim lighting and detached staff.

He took off the raincoat and placed it by his side on the seat; then, he withdrew the map from his pocket and unfolded it, laying it before him on the table.

It was a bit dizzying, this notion of geographical irrelevance.

So long he'd spent in egotistical tragedy - seeing that house as his world, the universe, the cosmos - and a little bit of paper came now to disprove it, to place it dispassionately somewhere along the shore and not even deem it worthy of a dot, of a side note; no, just plains of green, a threading of roads, numbers and names. No buildings, no houses.

It was all meaningless. He was nowhere.

The waiter returned with his order. Will thanked him with a nod.

From what he could tell there should be a road northeast leading inland. It wound with a sharp curve north, and about thirty, forty five minutes in it supposedly passed by a train station.

Will took a sip of the hot coffee, letting it burn down his throat.

A train station. He liked that.

He could buy a ticket to the first place he saw and disappear. Rolling along train tracks, lulled by metal clanks, simple, no fuss.

He didn't have to call anyone. Didn't have to call Jack, call Alana. Didn't have to tell them where he was, didn't have to drag himself into Hannibal's arrest. Will was tired of the investigation, of the cat and mouse; he could go by himself, desert both sides that had once fought for him.

He could leave the truck by the station. Hannibal would find it - eventually, inevitably - and he'd know.

They could both stay in Europe, forever unaligned. And years would go by, and perhaps Hannibal would rent a place in Paris while Will settled in Zagreb; and Hannibal would move on to Munich just as Will found his way to Spain; and they'd both take short trips to opposite ends of Poland; Hannibal would lounge between lovers in Luxembourg, and Will would travel to Lithuania and pretend it was just another place; and Hannibal would have an apartment over the Amstel in Amsterdam, while Will slept in a park bench just a few steps away; but they'd never find each other, and they'd both be alone, and it would be a miserable life.

A train.

He really liked that.

Chewing on a bit of toast, Will let the possibility set contours in his mind; let it simmer, enticing, and overthrow his skeptical spirit. It was a plan, a good plan, and he let himself get excited about it.

He could leave. Quietly, collected, his own.

By himself.

He could get odd jobs. He could save money over the years. He could find a way back to Wolf Trap.

Years from now, he could see his old house.

He could get there at night, see the way it hovered among black fog like a boat in water.

He could go home.

And it was a nice dream, and Will swallowed the rest of his coffee in one go so it could hurt and he could stop thinking of nice things.

Because there were circumstances. First off, he had no money. Less than twenty euros now; less and less with each day he spent there. Second of all, there was Winston.

And Winston - Will didn't know how to fix that.

Hannibal would be keeping him close by. At the house, all wide eyes waiting for Will. Or maybe he'd killed him in a fit of rage; in some grotesque way to please his design, something demeaning - corrupting the innocence Will had fought to preserve with a father's love. Will already knew Hannibal disliked Winston: why would he keep him around?

The waiter skimmed past him in a ruffle of apron and trousers. Will glanced, frowned, and stared back at the rest of his toast.

He didn't have an appetite anymore.

He ate the rest of it though, because he didn't know when the next time he'd eat would be. And he thought, in an effortful reproduction of optimism, that Hannibal couldn't have killed Winston; that he was too cunning, and that he'd be using him as a way to keep Will there.

It was a valid reason. In Will's heart, with Will's past, he couldn't bring himself to believe it.

He was distracted of his musings by a cheerful voice: the young woman that had been sitting outside had come in, greeting the employee behind the counter as she made her way through the little space between it and the booths. She fluttered past Will, then behind him, disappearing into one of the doors at the end of the corridor.

Will looked over his shoulder for a second, watching the door close.

The bathroom, probably.

The young woman was a strange mix of tourist and resident, and she'd looked at Will with intent eyes, and she'd looked *interested*. And Will, idly, chewing on the last piece of his toast, wondered if he could maybe seduce her - sleep in her house, maybe steal some money; leave her a little note, a selfish thing to qualm his own conscience, and walk out her door while she slept.

It was a solid plan. He'd get the money, fetch Winston somehow, and drive away.

To that train station, to that peacefully miserable life.

The young woman left the bathroom and walked back to the counter, chatting to the waiter. Will guessed she was paying her bill and steadied himself: after she left he'd pay as well and follow her, mumble some bashful excuse - some question about the map, about the village; he'd smile, and touch her arm, and she'd find him charming because she'd been there for too long and she was surely bored, and they'd set up a date - so she could tell him what was fun

to do, what was prettiest to see - and they'd end up in her house - wine, food - and that'd be that.

The waiter handed the woman her change and she moved away from the counter. And Will was grabbing his raincoat, ready to stand, to follow her out, when the woman turned to him.

Looked at him, all rushed intimacy, and smiled.

Well, it was a deviation of his original plan, but it still worked.

Will smiled back with a soft tug of lips, watching as the woman slipped into the booth, sitting opposite to him with her elbows so confident on the table, a mane of light brown hair weaved around her arms.

'Hi,' she greeted, brimming with nervous energy, 'I'm sorry in advance, if you aren't, but I think you are - are you Matthew?'

Will blinked, surprised. He wasn't expecting that.

'I'm sorry?'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I thought... the couple, the one that just moved up to the villa? I met one of them, Lloyd, and well, the way he'd described... I thought it was you.'

Will's heart fell.

She was very obviously talking about Hannibal. She was very obviously talking about *them*. And this young woman  became now tainted: she'd spoken to Hannibal, to his character; she was implicated, she was *marked*.

But the girl was still waiting with round olive eyes, and Will's first instinct had never been to *contradict* a story, so he rushed:

'Oh, yes. I'm sorry, I was just surprised that you knew who I was.'

He faked a chuckle, a lame gruff sound, for what had he done? Was he still to seduce this young soul that thought him taken? Or was he to endure the purposeless chat and pretend he was Matthew, content with Lloyd?

He deflated, unsure of what to do. But the girl lightened and said:

'I'm glad I didn't make a mistake, then,' her smile widened; it was an assymetrical little thing, only the right corner of her upper lip arching up, 'Hi, I'm Linette.'

'Nice to meet you, Linette,' Will said softly, offering her a hand to shake. And then, because he needed to know more, 'So, you've met Lloyd already?'

Linette nodded. The same energy as before, but more reserved: it seemed poised, unsure.

'Yes, we met a few days ago - one week, no, two? - and he was very nice. We met here, actually, but not here: outside,' she gave him another crooked smile, then repeated sheepishly, 'He's very nice.'

Will huffed wryly.

'He has his days.'

Linette laughed, her hair scattered across the tabletop, and Will was relieved: and he was utterly fond - utterly *envious* - of this woman that had somehow not been too sold on Hannibal, and the plan to deceive her was drifting away now, unsure, unappealing.

The young waiter stopped by the booth and took Will's dishes, exchanging a pair of kind words with Linette. She talked back in delicate Italian, elbows sliding so she was leaning further on the table, and Will, for such mindset had been imposed on him, made note of the rudeness - but in a much softer way, an exasperated solidarity of sorts, and the dull, grey understanding of how damning that could be for her.

He wondered mildly if she'd done the same when she'd met Hannibal.

He hoped fervently she hadn't.

'I'm happy to see you're better.'

Will quirked an eyebrow, confused. But the waiter was gone, and Linette was fully facing him, and the words were undoubtedly meant for him.

'What do you mean?'

'Lloyd mentioned you were sick. Quite unlucky to get sick in the beginning of your holiday; is this the first time you've come down?'

'Yes, it is. Figured some fresh air would make me feel better.'

He wished lying to her felt harder. But he'd lied often all his life: it felt poorly, but it was *easy*.

'And do you? Feel better, do you?'

The question felt ridiculous. Felt impossible to answer.

'I'm getting there.'

Still, Linette went on unbothered, and she leaned even closer, almost conspiratorially, with a hopeful glint in her eyes.

'Does that mean I'll see you for lunch tomorrow?'

Will kept silent for too long - he didn't know what to *say* - and Linette was quick to add:

'For the party. Not really a party: smaller. I invited you - through Lloyd, I did. He told me you were too sick to leave the house, so he'd be the only one attending.'

The smile Will scraped up was dying on his lips.

'I must have forgotten him mentioning it.'

It was a lunch: free food, a space surrounded by people. But dread within him lurched: Hannibal had said he'd be there.

Of course he had. Even in hiding he craved for social spotlight.

'Will you be there, then? You'll have fun, I promise. I'll try my best, anyway - I've only hosted two times before, but they both went really well.'

Linette was the peak of humble sincerity, so charmingly invested in her little luncheon - and it occured to Will that truly the kindest answer would be no; to rid her of him, of the complications he implied, and be nothing more than a somewhat awkward episode in a long, unremarkable life.

But Will was selfish, and he was desperate - and who could blame him, really? Linette was inviting him to her house, inviting him to a crowd of distracted people who'd most likely self-indulge in drinking, and what did he see in that but the opportunity for money? Money, and a train ticket, and park benches in Amsterdam?

And there was something else. How cathartic would it be to share a room with Hannibal knowing he'd left his grip? How poetic when none could harm the other?

Will nodded. It could go well. It could be good.

'Alright, I'll be there. Thank you.'

Linette went flushed with happiness.

'You'll love it. It's the house furthest up the hill when you're walking to the church. Have you gone to the church yet? It's one of my - probably everyone's - favourite place here. It's really pretty. Not the inside so much, but the grounds around it,' Linette scratched her head, then smiled crookedly, 'You should go.'

'I might, after I get out of here.'

'Good,' she said with one emphatic swing of her head. A short silence settled between them, the type that precedes staged goodbyes, and indeed after a moment longer Linette was rushing to her feet and stretching out a small hand engolfed in the sleeve of her jacket, 'Well, it was really nice to meet you, Matthew. I'm off now, but it was really nice. See you tomorrow then, right? House furthest up the hill? You can be there at noon.'

Will shook her hand, stood himself to watch her leave.

'See you then.'

She waved a little, turned to leave, went down the cigarette-scented corridor, turned back, waved one final time and walked out the door.

Will watched the mane of hair that was Linette give way to blue sky, then sat back down.

---

He went to the church, in the end.

The inside was pink marble slabs, high ceilings, corner molds. Spiffings of gold for grandeur's sake; furtive, in odd angles, to hide they were mostly paint.

An old woman sat on the forward benches, hunched with religious weight.

A man was sweeping the floor.

Will had sat on the last bench of the left row by the wall, beside a table of unlit candles. Hands on his lap, legs pressed together, trying to take as little space possible.

When he'd sat, the wood had creaked. That, and the bristles of the broom on the marble, were the sole sounds for the hour he'd spent there.

In the cold corner he'd laid. Entwined his fingers, closed his eyes; a slumber so indistinguishable from prayer.

He was woken by the sweeping fellow. The woman had gone while he slept. He was ushered out to the grounds. The man stood at the entry, broom in hand, and watched him go.

He wandered to the outer sanctuary to the left of the church; it was a circle of wrought iron benches secluded in a pocket of trees, a birdbath, a statue of some moderately illustrious figure neatly tucked to one side. He could see the path that led to the church cascading down the hill; the roofs below, the blue line of the ocean beyond blending with the clear sky.

On one of the benches, under the shade, Will settled. Dozed once more, lulled by intermittent chirping and the sweet feverish insomnia of the night before.

He dreamt of a long road. So long, endless. And he had to reach the end - had to - and he ought to start now. But he stood, and his foot never moved, and he stared helpless at the road.

Someone touched his shoulder, then.

He woke with it, but not when it had started: he woke knowing, unsettled, that the touch had been there for a while.

And he jumped, eyes opened; his head spun from the blue, the green, the light; he turned back, stumbling.

There, among the foliage, was Hannibal.

He stood, all burgundy, all striking crimson, all primly combed hair - and his fingers were entwined, and his cheekbones cut shadows on his face: he was a demon framed in green.

And Will didn't think much.

He would have thought he would; he would have thought he'd *die*. But Hannibal was in front of him, and Will didn't think much except for the fact that he felt *bad*.

Because now, seeing Hannibal in the wake of his escape, he knew what a terrible thing he'd done. He'd allowed Hannibal a glimpse of what he wished most; he'd kissed him and touched him and told him he loved him, and then - swiftly, *cruelly* - he'd slipped the towel, and the china had come shattering down, glass glistening in the ground for Hannibal alone to pick up.

And he could see it in Hannibal's eyes, the confusion, the hurt, the defeat: he looked at Will like something he'd lost, like something he realized he never had.

From each side of the wrought iron bench, they looked, and Will thought, almost dazed, that hours ago he'd kissed that man, and been in love.

'There's someone at the church. I could scream,' Will said eventually. It didn't have much bite. He didn't really mean it.

Hannibal smiled a soft little smile.

'Of course.'

His eyes were glistening. He looked *fond*, in a sad, faded way, and wasn't that terribly inconvenient?

'It's good to see you, Will.'

Will huffed, pained.

'Is it really?'

'I thought perhaps it wouldn't.'

Will shook his head, staring bitterly at the grass. Hannibal wasn't meant to see him. Will had made them an end: he'd poured his heart into it, and it *mattered*. What came after it was worthless; it was a different story altogether.

'What would you have done had I not woken?' he asked, empty, disbelieving - thinking of what could have happened, of how defenseless he'd been.

Hannibal pondered the question for a moment. He seemed wistful when he spoke:

'I thought of carrying you as you were, back up to the house. You'd wake in your bed, in your clothes. Perhaps you'd come to think it had all been a dream.'

Will chuckled - because wasn't there the most poetic simplicity to it, and wasn't it disgracefully like Hannibal to bend time, to bend the *world* to fit his needs?

Hannibal smiled back, a faint tilting of lips, and gingerly, in purposefully slow movements, he went around the bench and sat.

Legs crossed, hands in his lap, such a tame look. Harmless, proper, surrounded in greenery and undercut by birds, Hannibal was Nature's love.

'Am I supposed to sit with you?' Will asked, eyebrow raised.

'I'd like you to, yes,' Hannibal nodded, 'A tribute to our past selves.'

Will sighed, bit his lip. It'd be better to keep standing; tense, clenched, jittering in near flight.

But it was a tribute, and it was Hannibal: and turning from his path of hurried steps and stubborn blindness there was a new place, so pretty, so alluring, of melancholic dissecting and languorous reminiscing.

Will sat, mindful not to touch Hannibal - it felt impossible, touch; he wanted to wonder if Hannibal was there at all.

'If we're recreating something we should be sitting opposite from each other,' Will noted idly, staring out past the little sanctuary to the gentle slope of the hill, the burnt orange roofs below, the clear sky.

'I believe it's appropriate. We're no longer measuring strengths; we sit beside each other now.'

Will craned his neck just a little, to catch Hannibal staring intently at him.

'We've never stopped measuring strengths, Hannibal.'

Because it was true. Because they named themselves equals, but they'd never stopped searching for leverage.

Hannibal hummed.

'Perhaps we've just lost track of the measurements, then.'

Had they? Was there even a score?

Will didn't remember: who won, who lost, who were they? Because he'd won a few times, and each time he'd felt defeated; and he'd lost countlessly, yet the game had never ended - because the game didn't breathe outside them, it *was* them, and as long as Hannibal stood on Earth - touring Europe at Will's heels - there'd be no victor, there'd be no loser, there'd be no progress at all: they existed, and the game went on.

Had it been worth it, then? Will had left, and gone he still felt a part of it. There was no escape. The sun was filtering in through the leaves, the birds were chirping, the breeze was

gentle, and Will still felt confined in that house, curled in the corner of the couch, looking out the window, at the sand, at the grass, at...

'How's Winston?'

Hannibal's face fell; he looked, somehow, *unsure*, and for a moment Will couldn't breathe, and Winston was dead, somewhere buried in the dirt, and Will was going to kill Hannibal.

But then:

'He's as you left him.'

The world rushed back; but with it a new pain, a visceral hurt - he *missed* Winston, the type of missing that begs your body to bend so your head is closer to the earth.

'Thank you,' he murmured. It felt like a joke.

'In fact,' and Hannibal was back to looking unsure, his tone cautious, 'I would like to keep him.'

Will's head jerked back.

'What?'

'I've grown fond of him.'

It was a lie - and it was petty, and it hurt.

'You haven't,' he snapped, 'You're not *able* to. You can't *love* him, Hannibal.'

Hannibal stared off. When he spoke it was in a contemplative tone.

'No. But within him your love is preserved. I'll cherish that.'

Will laughed, incredulous.

'Is this some sort of revenge?'

'I rather wish it was,' Hannibal smiled sadly at him, and said nothing else.

Will sighed, staring at his feet, at the old boots sunk into the grass; nudged a protruding root, gathered his fingers tightly in his lap - and he swallowed the succeeding weights in his throat, the little sob, the tears that were settling deviously behind the skin of his cheeks, climbing up and up, so close to spilling out.

It felt like his entire being was about to leak; like the bubbling of *injustice* inside him would culminate in either one of two things: either he'd fall to his knees, clinging to the wet soil as he cried with the pathetic genuinity of a child; or he'd tear out the skin of his palms and see the blood river down.

Slowly, with an empty smile - for he knew himself, he knew it was red he shared - Will dug nails into his skin.

'You don't need my permission, Hannibal.'

'I'll take good care of him.'

'Will you?'

'I'll try.'

And Will didn't give an answer to that, didn't persist, didn't demand further promises; it was a simple pledge, and it was all he got. More words, more filler, it was inconsequential - Will could do nothing but listen to it, anyway.

He leaned his body away from Hannibal; from the crimson suit, the pomp, the overwhelming *existence* of it all; and he settled into fainter shades, greens and browns, and his head hung to the left, the town - the sea, the sky - perfectly blurry and sideways.

And he thought idly on how simple it all was: to fall back into routine. They were, for all intents and purposes, predator and prey, and still, in light of other years - of other nights, of other lives - they sat, and they spoke.

Will had run so often, he'd run so far - how strange it was that the world was still the same.

'I'd never thought about it before,' he said, watching the sluggish silhouettes in the streets beyond, 'how hard it is to leave a place.'

He could feel Hannibal's inquisitive gaze on him.

'Is that why you plan to attend Linette's luncheon tomorrow?'

Will huffed. He felt, for some reason, despicably betrayed: by Hannibal, by Linette, he didn't know.

'You talked to her?'

'I did. She was the one who suggested you might be at the church.'

Will nodded.

'She took a quick liking to you,' Hannibal said with mild displeasure. Will wanted to pursue it, to *twist* it.

'She's lovely.'

He risked a glimpse at Hannibal's expression, and relished in the tightening of his features.

'Is it not foolish to make friends, if you plan to leave?' he remarked cooly.

Will shrugged. The birds chirped above them, hidden in the winding branches, and everything seemed so meaningless, so boringly natural.

'I need money. The party seemed like a fine way to get some.'

'You'd steal from her?'

And Will could sense the smug cat grin: so glad at his apparent lack of concern from Linette; he wanted Will indifferent to the world, for he was an expert at extricating himself from it.

'I'll steal from whomever I have to,' he answered, tone curt, 'That's the position you've put me in.'

Hannibal shifted; turned further to Will, his hands so eery in his lap - like the clown in the box, always just about to lunge - and held his gaze with renowned grief, with the rush of sadness they'd been politely ignoring.

'You put yourself here, Will. I would have given you the world.'

And Will knew everything else, every other word, all the *tributes*, the *courtesies,* they led up to this: like the maddening symphonies he'd heard from his corner of the couch, the instruments curled up, built louder, and punched in with all the nothing that'd been left unsaid.

So Will turned as well, and let his detachment break, the faded colours bleed - he was there now, with Hannibal, and this was the end of something, whatever that might be.

'I don't think you would have, Hannibal. You don't share.'

'Do you still think of me so little?' Hannibal spoke with less bite, more disappointment; he looked as if he'd realized his own failure, 'Do you still hold such misconceptions of how I feel for you?'

It was absurd. It was ridiculous, and Will dug his elbows into his thighs, burying his face in his hands, exasperated, because Will had delusions, Will had nightmares - he'd never had *misconceptions*.

'What you feel for me? Love? Is that what you call it? Then tell me, Hannibal, tell me if I get this wrong; because I *see* you, did you forget?' - and Will knew he hadn't, he never did, but the words stumbled off unbidden, and it was *true*: Hannibal acted like such a mystery, but he *wasn't* - 'And you're here, and you took your time to get dressed, to look composed; and you didn't even bring a gun, did you?' - Hannibal shook his head mildly, and it only fueled Will's fury, for he could see the picture so *clearly* now, and Hannibal had shaded it blue and grey, and the more Will understood it, the more he hated it, 'You didn't rush here, and you didn't plan to bring me back. So tell me, what does this look, what do you think I'm seeing right now: someone fighting for a lover, or a defeated man who's come to say goodbye?'

And it stopped there. It hung in the air, the word.

Goodbye.

That's what it was.

Hannibal had come to reminisce.

To shake hands, and remark the changes in their lives with the distant tone of something long gone, and leave.

And the anger swayed. The symphony paused. It was all blank, and Will was all empty.

Perhaps the birds were singing; perhaps the leaves were rustling; Will heard nothing, saw nothing but Hannibal sitting beside him on the bench, already blurred in his angles, already a dream he'd later have:

'My dear,' Hannibal's voice - was it real, was it already gone? - felt so soft, so sad, 'Can I not love you and say goodbye?'

Will smiled. He'd never thought about it.

'You always said you hurt me because you loved me. What am I supposed to think now that you spare me?'

Hannibal frowned, and he reached for Will, sweet, tender, but Will moved away. His hand hovered, unsure, between them. For one brief moment, a moment locked between trees, concealed from the world under their shade, Hannibal looked very young, and very lost.

'I thought this was what you wanted.'

Will pondered over it for but a second; was this what he'd longed for, a small chat next to a church, a parting witnessed by God to end in solemn splendor the chapter they'd shared? Perhaps. But Will didn't know, because if he thought of what he wanted, he had to go back in time - years back, souls back, to Wolf Trap, to his dogs, to his lectures, to a life where he wore glasses and looked at the ground too often and drove for an hour every night to a warm, safe bed; a time before Hannibal, when all the dark, all the *rot*, was but a dull sound, something to ignore, something that didn't belong to him - and wanting all of this, and knowing it was impossible to return to those times where his life was a simple exercise of patience, how could he say he wanted anything else, anything infinitely smaller, infinitely worthless, to better the nightmare he lived in?

He couldn't.

'I want nothing, Hannibal, but for everything to be different.'

He could see the hurt in his eyes; the moment he knew Will preferred to forget him - not change, not manipulate their stories to a hazy daydream of matrimony; Will wished to rake him from memory, full, *complete*, so that his name held no meaning and his figure, if ever should they pass each other on the street, was that of a stranger.

How inconvenient for a love story that one lover might wish the other not to exist; how horribly crude that instead of love or hate there might be a mere wish for indifference.

Hannibal knew, and his silence was long: there was a dimming of lights in his eyes, a fainting of muscles under his skin - all of him was smaller, devastated, hopeless.

'I had thought, perhaps, that it would be easy to see you go,' he confessed, like he couldn't believe himself, 'I'd resolved to let you leave; for us to part like grown men.'

Hence the suit, hence the rich crimson, hence the combed silver and clipped tie - he'd gone to Will as the character, as the front the world met, to architect an ending he could control; to finish them in his own flourished handwriting - to leave a poetic sentence, a blending of words that made them seem stronger, more decisive and less heartbroken than they were.

Something to read, in years to come, that wouldn't leave tears.

Something to read, alone in the dark, that left the thought it had all been for the best.

It was a good wish, a good betime lie.

'Have you changed your mind?' Will asked. The fear was tingling in his legs again; the morbid thought that Hannibal would sink teeth right to his bone and drag him back.

But Hannibal didn't jump. He said, trembling in wounded dignity:

'I don't know.'

Will breathed out; and he looked around at the enclosure of trees - so alike Hannibal's office, so alike his dining table - and knew he had to go. To be there another second, in that space that was so much at once, was an echo he could not hear, a pull he could not counter.

He stood up, stepped away from the bench.

'I should leave now, then.'

Hannibal nodded, lips pressed tight. And Will turned, and he hadn't yet given three steps when he heard Hannibal ask:

'Will I see you tomorrow, at Linette's luncheon?'

Will stopped, thought for a moment.

'Yes, I think so. But you'll see me as Matthew. I think Hannibal and Will are dead.'

And it felt true. As Will walked away, as he left behind the benches and the trees, it felt as well as if he was leaving behind two corpses - and beside that church, in the lonesome sanctuary, he felt his bones begin to settle.

Linette's house was surrounded by a quaint white wall.

One story, burnt orange roof; white walls, rock columns, floor-to-ceiling windows with the shutters open. At the front a paved court, a circular little space where a table had been set. Two men sat there, leaning back lazily on foldable chairs, legs crossed and drinks in hand, chatting.

Will was on the street under the shadow of a tree, sweat on his brow from the high hanging sun. With narrowed eyes he stared at the house, at the open windows that led out onto the pavement, glimpsing at the clues of bustling inside - a sashaying of summer dresses, the glint of a glass in a moving hand, Linette's unmistakable head of curls hurrying to and fro with plates perilously balanced on her arms.

He could already feel the overwhelming airs of socializing that would pester him; his ears already ached with the incessant chatter - and still, Will felt strangely distanced from it all, for within that quaint white wall, conversing and drinking with the rest, there would be Matthew, not him. Truly, no one would know him, and when he left, if someone chose to mention him, they'd have nothing but a wrong name and a faded notion of a face.

He'd become Matthew, and he'd have some free food, self-indulge in expensive alcohol and steal someone's wallet; and as he became Matthew, orbiting far from him there would be Lloyd - and so, in equal manner, Will felt like he wouldn't be seeing Hannibal at all.

There was a dry hint of curiosity in it: to coexist with Hannibal when they were both someone else.

With a push, Will stepped from under the tree's shade and crossed the street. The men sitting outside gave him a brief look, then returned their eyes to their drinks; Will headed to the open window from where he'd been watching people filtering in and out, assuming it was the right way in, and peered inside: it was a wide room, an open plan, kitchen to the right and living space to the left, a long table in the center that had been covered with food platters; guests were scattered casually around, either leaning against counters or sitting in sofas, one arm around themselves and the other holding a drink as they chatted. It was a small, cozy little house, and the luncheon seemed long practised and very much of a tradition; Will felt like he was invading, and he was overcome with the sudden surge to leave.

But then a hand was around his arm, and Linette was pulling him in.

'Matthew! You came.'

Will greeted her with a kiss to her cheek. She wore a yellow dress; she smelled like cherry tomatoes.

'You came,' she repeated, holding onto his forearm, reeling him completely into the room - and he was in the party, he was there, and it was done, 'I thought you wouldn't. Lloyd said he

wasn't sure, and I thought: he won't come. But you did.'

'I did,' he nodded, gaze skirting through the space, slithering through the little groups, trying to distinguish Hannibal between them, 'It looks nice in here.'

Linette smiled and brought him closer to the long table. Her fingers slipped away from his skin, and Will found himself missing the warm little touch: it had felt so pure, so lifting, the childlike enthusiasm with which one holds onto a kite.

He remembered touch that weighed him down; he remembered touch that sunk.

'I made it all myself,' Linette said, gesturing at the platters of food, 'Well, Francesca helped - have you met her? she's Lorenzo's cousin, have you met *him*? - anyway, she helped, but only with little things like dicing,' she pointed at an assortment of round little delicacies, 'I even made the puff pastry,' her smile was victorious, 'It took hours.'

'It looks wonderful,' then, at a loss for what else to say, 'Do you like cooking?'

Linette shook her head. A woman elbowed her as she moved past, apologized in slurred words, then whisked her into a brief exchange - mostly in Italian - which seemed, by the amount of indiscreet pointing, to concern the two men he'd seen outside. Will hovered where he stood, hip pressing against the table's edge, reluctant to turn his back and meet anyone else: he liked Linette, loved the fact he already knew her, and didn't want to lose her out of sight.

He did, however, peek out the corner of his eye at a profusion of clothes on a hanger by the front door - and his eye travelled fluidly to the side of it, to a little dresser whose surface was covered with handbags.

At least two of them were open - such was the charm of villages. How simple would it be to find some money in one? To pretend he was adjusting his hair in the mirror that hung above it, waving a hand through his curls in exuberant, distracting movements, while the other snuck inside and retrieved a handful of bills?

'I don't, not really. Like cooking, I mean,' came Linette's answer as the other woman walked away; like their conversation had been merely suspended, and now, seamlessly, it resumed, 'It's a great deal of trouble, and it's all eaten in the end.'

Echoes of past dinners came to mind. Hannibal had told him good food lasted like love did.

He glanced at his left, where a trio was perusing the table with empty plates in hand - all that food, chewed and swallowed past their throats; unceremoniously grotesque.

'I think I agree with you.'

Linette smiled, pleased. It quickly dissolved into embarrassment.

'But the food *is* good. I mean, they seem to like it. Lorenzo - I'll introduce you to him - said the pâté was some of the best he'd ever had. Well, it's not true, I don't think so, but it's a nice

thing to hear. I wanted to see what Lloyd thought of it, so I'm a bit sad. Why couldn't he make it?'

There was a stutter in Will's heart.

Hannibal wasn't there.

And it made sense. Will would have felt it, were Hannibal there. The room would be different; the voices wistful. And there'd be a circle of admirers and in their middle the star.

There was nothing. Dead words and scattered crowds.

Hannibal wasn't there.

Will forced a smile, very pointedly not meeting Linette's expectant eyes.

'I fear I've gotten him sick. He sends his apologies.'

She nodded, and there was perhaps an answer, or perhaps she'd gone on about the food.

Will didn't know.

Hannibal hadn't shown, and he felt - inexplicably, horribly - empty.

---

The luncheon had progressed. The groups had whirled as the alcohol kicked in; there was nothing but crumbles on the plates. Will had been, for the most part, incredibly bored: everyone who tried to chat with him scurried off after a few dry replies.

Someone had had the nerve to tell him they found Lloyd a real catch. Idly, he'd wondered if, were he to throw them through the window, any shards would stay embedded in their skin.

And he'd thought. For most of the time, he'd thought. He'd looked at the disappointment inside him as one stares at an ugly thing that does not belong to them, and that they wish could keep its existence private. Likewise Will regarded this broken feeling that had crept up; likewise Will wished it had never surfaced.

It didn't mean that Will missed Hannibal. No. But it meant something of the sort. It meant a cousin of the feeling: a painful awareness that life without Hannibal would stretch on - that he'd walk into a room, and there'd be nothing to fear.

That he was back to that lonesome place of years ago. No-one saw him, and what he saw was not worth seeing twice.

But in the end that's what he'd wanted. If no one saw him, he wouldn't ache to *show*.

There was a game of charades being prepared in the living area. A man - Lorenzo, as he now knew him - was writing movie titles on pieces of paper. Absolutely hating the idea, Will snuck out the house and into the patio, hoping for some fresh air.

Linette was sitting on one of the chairs, alone, a piece of bread in one hand.

'I tried the pâté again,' she said while he took the seat next to her, 'Everyone was lying.'

Will chuckled, 'It really was good.'

There was a little dent in her hair over her left temple; maybe she'd tried to tame it with a hairclip.

'Yes, it was good,' Linette replied with a little smile.

The silence stretched. Behind them, inside the house, there was a bout of high-pitched laugher. A flock of seagulls flew toward the ocean.

'Can I ask you something?'

Linette nodded.

'Why are you here?'

Will had wondered - because Linette walked in a blurred line between tourist and resident; she didn't seem like she worked, yet she lived by herself; she threw parties as if trying to know the entire village at once; and she was young, and Will wanted to know what had led her there, what course had ultimately entwined her with Hannibal, with himself; what person exactly was it that he planned to steal from.

Linette huffed a little laugh, scratching the side of her head.

'Grandma died - my mother's mother did, though my other grandma died too - and left me a big inheritance. She had a little house here, and I came to see it. That was a few years ago.'

'And do you like it?'

Linette handed Will a piece of bread and bit into a piece of her own.

'Well, I didn't like living in America. When I remember that, I think I'm very happy here.'

Will hummed, swallowing his piece.

'Can I ask *you* something?'

She'd leaned toward him, hushed her voice. Will arched an eyebrow.

'Of course.'

'Is everything alright between you and Lloyd?'

Will snorted. Perhaps, between Matthew and Lloyd, it could have been.

'We drive each other crazy,' he replied. It was the truest thing he could tell her.

'I think I don't like him,' Linette admitted, sounding cautious, glancing through the window to check if anyone was near, 'But I think it'd be very easy to love him.'

Her face was awfully close, her tone conspiratorial - wasn't she clever to feel like she was criticizing God?

'Yes, he's very easy to love,' Will murmured.

There was a scattering of freckles under Linette's right eye. Will swiped his thumb over them softly. In the moment they were alone, they were together, and Will felt surging within him the lightest fondness for Linette - for there were freckles under his eyes too, and he'd disobeyed God too, and she was a young echo, a little ghost. Will saw how terrible it could all end for her, how tragic it was that she hadn't loved Hannibal - that she seemed to prefer him - and it made her seem softer, faded, gone.

She elicited a tenderness for dead things.

Will kissed her.

A quick, chaste little thing. A press of lips, a second of pressure; then, he withdrew.

Glimpsed through the window. No one was looking, no one had seen.

'Do me a favour?' he asked, breath close to her cheek.

'What is it?' she whispered, a little surprised, a little dazed.

'Never be rude to him.'

Linette's lips twitched, her brow furrowed. She scanned for a joke; there was none.

She nodded.

'Thank you,' he smiled softly, and they leaned away from each other. It felt important that she knew. It felt like she was implied in everything.

In silence they stayed there, in their chairs, inches apart. Linette finished her bread. Will looked further up, at the curve of the hill, the way it sloped toward the church.

He could see the tips of trees beside it. The edges of the sanctuary. There Hannibal and Will had died, and now, with that kiss, so too did Matthew and Lloyd.

Linette left with a warm apology, having to return to her host duties. There was a fleeting hand in his shoulder, an innocent goodbye, that filled Will with the dangerous vulnerability of a new friendship. He lingered there a little longer until the man from earlier, the one who'd prodded him with his friends about his relationship with Hannibal, found him and tried to resume his questions.

Will excused himself, claiming he needed to go to the bathroom, and went back inside.

It was terribly crowded - everyone was loud, and *drunk*.

Will slithered to the dresser by the main door, thinking it could be his chance, but a lady was there, searching for something in her handbag. Disappointed, he walked off, past the kitchen and into a narrow corridor, hoping to find a bathroom he could use as shelter for a little while.

He found one.

A small little room with ugly orange floor tiles, an old clawfoot tub, a vanity whose smooth marble surface was clear of personal objects. Will placed his hands on the cold stone and glanced at himself through the mirror.

He wished he had never seen himself.

Never, not once, since he'd been born. Then, when he thought of the person who fed Winston, and the person who Linette had kissed, and the person Hannibal loved, he could picture someone different every time - and there could be the illusion, simple and tender, that he wasn't all of them at once.

And he looked, really looked, and Will didn't recognize himself - who was he? What was he doing in Italy, in some unnamed village, in some stranger's house, planning to steal money to run? Who was he, away from all that defined him, brought by a man who ached to recreate him? Who was he, now that he had a different name? What was his plan, now that he couldn't remember his goal?

What was he *doing*?

Will opened the faucet, letting the water trickle down his fingers. It pooled pristine in the cup of his hands. He leaned down to spring it on his face, letting his vision blurr, his eyes close as the water slithered in rivers across his cheeks. And, with his eyes still closed, he went for more water again and again, and scrubbed his face clean - cleansed it, *purified* it; perhaps the water would wash away this person he'd become, this person so far from whom he'd once hoped to be.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Hannibal.

Standing by the door, flesh, blood, pictured glistening in the mirror.

Hannibal. And it couldn't be true.

The water poured into the basin. Will blinked at the stream, his throat knots, his heart quiet.

Looked back at the mirror. Maroon eyes stared back.

And he turned; at last, he turned - because in him had always lingered the morbid compulsion to distinguish delusions from nightmares.

It didn't waver; it didn't flicker. Hannibal was there, blinking, his chest rising softly.

Real.

He stepped gingerly inside and closed the door behind him. It clicked shut.

Will followed his movements closely, but Hannibal didn't seem to have any further intentions: he stood by the door, rigid, tense. He still looked, a little, like a ghost. Will couldn't believe he was there.

'You came.'

'Yes.'

Their words were hushed. Soft confessions slipping in orange tiles.

Silence stretched. It was strange. Usually, Hannibal had a purpose in his silences - he looked aimless, rash, a man anticipating in seconds and not weeks.

It was strange. It was all strange. And Will furrowed his brow, and thought that this had not been pondered: it had been a clumsy resuscitation of them both, when they'd already settled deep into their coffins - and now, surprised, ill-prepared, they trembled in their bones.

'Why *did* you come?'

It was as if the question hurt him. As if it made something inside Hannibal twist, and the subtlest hint of greek anguish and biblical storms reverberated beneath his skin.

'I've found that whenever I say goodbye to you, I do it looking forward to the next time I might see you and say it again.'

Will huffed. The faucet was still on; a current of water in his ears.

He searched blindly behind himself and switched it off. It got quieter, just the unintelligible rumoring of the guests outside.

They all felt so far now; so pointless, extrinsic to his life.

Hannibal cleared his throat, and when he spoke his words were measured detachment, the lamest pretense, the saddest attempt at nursing a broken heart:

'What you said yesterday. That you wished it all to be different. Is it true? Is there no part of you that wishes to remember me?'

Will smiled an empty little smile. He knew the answer to that; he'd known it since he'd uttered those words, he'd known it since Linette had told him Hannibal hadn't shown; since he'd frozen midheartbeat and taken in a world without Hannibal.

'No, it's not true. I just wish it was.'

Light graced Hannibal's features: the melancholic relief of someone easing a disappointment. And Will saw in contrast how dark he'd seemed before - how his eyes had seemed further sunken, his cheekbones further shadowed, his hair, with little loose strands, clueing at a mild dishevelment which had always spoken volumes for him.

Cautiously, Hannibal took a step forward. Will flinched back, hit the edge of the vanity, gripped the marble edge.

'Would you ever return with me?' Hannibal asked, and he said it with the most tragic smile, with a humour bereft of hope.

'You know the answer to that,' Will said softly.

'Would you pretend, then? Like you did that night? Would you pretend one last time?'

Another step. Will could reach out and touch him: see - definitely, finally - if he was true.

Hannibal was staring expectantly, an urgency in his eyes, a flickering in his muscles. And Will saw, in a flash, in the set of visions which would forever haunt him, the man he'd once kissed, the man he'd led into his bedroom, the man who he'd undressed, and the way, in turn, that Hannibal's lips had trembled under his, the awed looks he'd given him, the worship in his fingers, the gentlest confessions of love.

The confessions he'd returned. The confessions he'd felt, for one moment of blissful confusion, were entirely and eternally true.

'Would you want me to, knowing it was pretend?'

'I was foolish enough to let my mind drift that night; to see it as a beginning, and waste time dreaming of what was ahead. I feel as if I should have cherished it more,' Hannibal said, and he seemed sincere, he seemed *regretful*, 'I would, if you allowed me.'

Will wondered if he could grip the edge of the vanity any harder; if his knuckles could pierce his skin, if the pain could make the rest number.

And he wondered what moments had Hannibal been absent in - in what moments had he retreated into his mind, delirious, euphoric, to outline newer scenes for their love, newer possibilities now in store. What had Hannibal missed, what could Will give him.

And the decision was made. The words fell unbidden from his tongue.

'Yes. I'd pretend.'

He could pity a monster. It wasn't mercy. It wasn't weakness.

Hannibal was statue quietude: static, black pupils set on Will, searching, undoubtedly, for any contradicting sign, any catch - scared of falling into the same trap, of swimming blindly toward the same lure.

There was nothing but sincerity in Will's eyes. He assumed so, at least - he wasn't sure himself - because Hannibal's caution was quick to evaporate, and as eerily as it had come the static snapped to frenzy, and Hannibal was closing the distance in two wide steps, shoes clicking on the horrid orange tiles, cradling Will's face with one hand and kissing him.

It was familiar. Hannibal had kissed him before; now he kissed him again. It seemed, by continuity's sake, perfectly simple.

Familiar, yes, the pressure of fingers on his jaw; the weight against him, the counter edge digging into his back; the warmth of Hannibal's lips, the way they curled, the sneak of teeth forever featured - an obscene reminder - in Hannibal's kisses. Familiar, not imperatively good.

Hannibal's nose nudged against his, and Will tilted his head a little back. Immediately, the hand which had been holding the side of his face trailed down his throat in ghostly touches, and Hannibal detached his mouth but for an inch - for all he could bear - to murmur:

'I had hoped… I'd never thought you'd accept.'

Will snorted, and placed his hands gingerly on Hannibal's hips - proof that he'd agreed, that the charade was back in place, that he was mind and movement too.

It felt ironically powerful, conceding to such a thing: kissing Hannibal again, *pretending* again, not as a scheme, not as a ploy, but as a *favour*.

'You don't do things based on hope, Hannibal.'

Hannibal smiled and gently kissed the corner of Will's mouth, his arms lacing around his waist, eager to have him as close as possible.

'You'd be surprised, my love,' he replied, sweet tone in bloom again, and Will recognized it from the moments they'd shared; the innocent, smitten fragility evident in it, the impending vulnerability Will had so often abused.

Not undeservingly, Will thought. Not unprovoked.

And that made him press his lips to Hannibal's again; chaste, quickly retreating, simply to see Hannibal follow him.

Perhaps he'd said yes with good intentions. Perhaps, when Hannibal had asked, Will had thought it would help: that he could leave this man with a pitiful party gift in a narrow bathroom and leave free of guilt, free of loose ends. But that was then, that was before he'd slipped a tongue into Hannibal's despair, before he'd found anew his own resentment - and now, wicked, cold, a little voice inside him told him differently: how easy it would be to make it worse, how simple, how *magnificient* to completely break him.

After all, Hannibal had come to plead. Will could service him and leave unbothered, leave in control, as Hannibal stood a hopeless mess, an addict ever reaching for a final dose.

'Darling,' Hannibal rasped, and his hands slid deftly under Will's shirt. They burnt on Will's skin, pushed deep into the tissue, mapped the area in contradicting want, moving down, up, then down again, 'You're tense. You're sore.'

Will bit off a groan as Hannibal found a whining muscle, and held onto Hannibal's shoulders, letting himself be pushed further back so he was propped against the counter edge.

'I'm fine.'

'Don't lie, Will,' Hannibal stared him down sternly, never ceasing his prodding on Will's back, 'Where have you been sleeping? Have you slept at all?'

He had inserted himself between Will's legs again. Like all those other times where Will had been defenseless, when he'd been bound and numb, where Hannibal had very deliberately crossed a line. It didn't feel like that now. It felt like the night of his escape, when he'd known who was the fool.

'I have. In the truck,' Will answered, smiling slightly at Hannibal's affront.

'That is hardly any proper rest,' he said, lips thin. His hands travelled to the collar of Will's shirt; his fingers fiddled with the first button for a moment, 'May I?'

There was an evident line of heat in Hannibal's tone; a veiled, wanton impatience. Will wanted to frustrate it.

Furthermore, he wanted boundaries. He wanted to draw them freely, indulgently, arbitrarily, simply to see Hannibal comply.

'You can unbutton it. Don't take it all off, though.'

The pained expression Hannibal tried to conceal was obscenely rewarding.

But the boundary was drawn. Hannibal unbuttoned Will's shirt, traced fingers over Will's bare chest, dipped his head to press a kiss to his clavicle - but he stood on his side of the sand, and the shirt remained around Will's shoulders, a tease, a refusal, a privilege he hadn't earned.

Now that the fabric moved more loosely, Hannibal was able to fully work on Will's back, persistently massaging the tissue. Will was now fully perched on the marble counter, his feet hanging above the ugly floor tiles. The stirrings of an erection were becoming clearer with each twist of Hannibal's fingers, and Will struggled to contain his noises, paranoid that someone would hear.

Idly, he thought of Linette. Would he ever look into her eyes again without seeing visions of those orange tiles, of the marble edge, of the things he and Hannibal had done?

A particularly skilled touch made his lower back melt, and Will muffled an embarrassingly loud sound in Hannibal's shoulder. He could feel the man chuckle as he moved his hand

soothingly up Will's skin.

'Would you not prefer a bed, dear?' Hannibal tilted Will's chin up, angled his face until Will met his eyes, 'Would you not prefer to be laying down comfortably as I took care of you?'

It was difficult not to picture it - with Hannibal's fingers working so perfectly, eliciting little shivers each time they strayed further down, each time they greedily grazed the hem of Will's slacks, and the charged look Hannibal was giving him, it was like he could clearly see, reflected in Hannibal's eyes, the fantasy he was describing: him, back in the confines of that house, enveloped in feather and linen white, shutters open and a breeze prickling his bare skin, Hannibal massaging him in languorous bliss.

It was beautiful. Something inside Will longed for it; the simplicity of it. And Hannibal, desperate to see Will cave, to convince him with nothing more than pretty words and gentle touches, took to kissing his cheeks in worship.

'Sweetheart, Will. Let me drive you back. You're tired, you should not be alone. Let us go back, yes? I'll draw you a bath, I'll open the bed for you. Wouldn't that be pleasant, darling?'

Will didn't answer, but he did look away - stared at the door over Hannibal's shoulder, wondered why it seemed so far away.

'Will?' Hannibal tried to coax Will's eyes back to his, his hands sliding around to stroke Will's chest instead, tracing lines from sternum to navel, 'Let's go, alright? We'll change your clothes to something more comfortable. You'd like that, my sweet boy, I know you would. Let's go, darling.'

And Hannibal entwined his hand with Will's and tried, softly - scared to break Will out of his pliant state - to push him closer, to guide him to the door.

Will snapped at that, backing up firmly against the vanity.

There were no open shutters or featherlight sheets anymore. He was back to real life, to the ugly implications of it.

'Hannibal, no.'

'Please, sweetheart,' Hannibal insisted, breath hot against Will's forehead, lips grazing his skin.

*'No',* Will hissed, fighting against Hannibal's persistent tug, 'Stop it, Hannibal, I'm serious.'

He tried to inch himself back further, scaling up the counter until his back hit the mirror. Hannibal's hands slipped from his chest, settling on his thighs.

They were quiet. From the other side of the house there came a yell; it dissolved into laugher, a high-pitched rumbling.

Hannibal was staring heavy-lidded, dark-eyed. Will shifted in his disarray - with his hair tousled, his shirt open, his posture awkward and bent, his legs hanging at each side of

Hannibal's hips, he felt vulnerable, and he feared that somewhere along the conversation that edge of resentment that had filled him, that had bittered his tongue and sharpened his lips, had now softened like it always did with Hannibal, and it had turned into ambivalence, into this detachment from himself, like it was pointless to choose.

Ridiculous, really. He'd started with such power, such ruthlessness in his mind, and still it ended like this - it *always* ended like this - and how fucking  did Will have to be to forever search for different results?

'Will,' Hannibal purred, oblivious to Will's introspection, still blurred in that cloud of arousal. He leaned into him, predatorial, and clashed their mouths together.

Will, who wanted above anything else not to be *indifferent* anymore - to do something, *anything* - bit back *hard*.

A droplet of blood beaded on Hannibal's bottom lip. Their foreheads met, their eyes aligned.

Hannibal looked entirely in love.

'You always fucking push it,' Will panted.

Hannibal smiled, and teased the cut with the tip of his tongue.

'I apologize.'

They kissed again. Will kept his grip on Hannibal's hair, forcing his head still, controlling the kiss. His mouth felt like metal, his tongue was copper red, and Hannibal's hand was snaking down to cup the formings of his erection.

'Let me, my love,' he rasped, voice low, already popping the button of Will's slacks.

'Hannibal-' the word was cut short when Hannibal drew the zipper down, exposing Will to the warm air, 'Hannibal, stop.'

Hannibal looked at him quizzically, fingers stilling on Will's inner thigh.

'Take your hand away.'

He said it in the steadiest tone possible, and delighted in the hurt in Hannibal's features, in the sudden cautiousness.

'Would you not like my help?'

'No,' was Will's short reply, watching in satisfaction as Hannibal's hand twitched away and settled tersely on his bare thigh; then, he faced Hannibal once more, saying, as if in an after-thought, 'But you can watch.'

It was dizzyingly rewarding, the way Hannibal's breath wavered.

And it pushed Will to take himself in hand before Hannibal, to tentatively stroke his erection for the other to see. To indulge himself for one moment of rotten decadence, to dive blindly into hedonism's hypocrisy; to know, despite it all, that it was not Hannibal's hand that brought by those sensations - it wasn't wrong, it didn't *count*, because Hannibal could only watch and Will was only doing him a favor; and it felt, inexplicably so, like the scales that Hannibal had rigged were tilting naturally again, and all the unwanted touches and imposed intimacy could be buried under this one show of control.

It felt like he was rewriting everything.

It was tremendously satisfying.

He stroked himself slowly from root to tip, releasing a shuddering breath, sinking back further onto the mirror. Hannibal looked breathless as well, hands digging bruises into Will's inner thighs, spreading them wide so he could fully see the gift Will was offering.

His fingers twitched, like they were one slip away from joining Will's hand.

Will wanted to laugh. So long he'd pleaded for Hannibal to stop, for Hannibal to *refrain*, and now, now of all times, now that Will was already *ruined*, he did.

He didn't laugh. He placed a hand on Hannibal's shoulder for support, searched for the bare skin at the base of his neck and sunk his nails.

He'd hoped idly for a hiss. He got a pleasured groan instead, and a set of hot lips on his forehead.

'Will, my love, you look so beautiful,' Hannibal whispered against his skin, voice a strained whisper, 'Absolutely perfect, divine. Go faster for me, yes? Don't be shy.'

Will bit his lip, suppressing a moan when Hannibal came to nibble at his ear. The slow rhythm was torture, and he wanted to build it into something more distracting, something of white light in his mind, but he *couldn't.*

'Hannibal, they'll hear,' he uttered, glancing somewhat resentfully at the door behind them - and he'd forgotten it existed, and it seemed ridiculous that there could be a way out of there.

'Let them hear, sweetheart. Let them know there is no room here for them; that we belong only to each other.'

There was a gathering of precum on Will's dick, and Will couldn't help smearing it with his thumb - he whimpered at the feeling, and then remembered all the times Hannibal had done that for him while he writhed and protested.

Something died in his chest; something infinitely more complex grew.

'I don't-' Will struggled to say, 'I don't particularly like the idea of getting interrupted.'

Hannibal smirked, lifting a hand to brush some hair from Will's forehead, then letting it slither down to clamp possessively over Will's nape.

'I very much doubt they'd dare enter the room. That would be terribly rude.'

'Well, I'm not doing it with them talking through the door.'

Will didn't really know if that was true - it felt impossible to stop now, that dizzying glide and suffocating crescendo that made everything else seem so irrelevant.

Hannibal let out a low growl in his throat, and the hand that had been gripping Will's inner thigh rose swiftly, hovering a mere inch from the base of Will's erection - not touching, but desperately wanting to.

'I would not let you out until you finished,' he said, and there was disturbing sincerity in his words, in the steady eyes that met Will's, 'I will not allow for anyone else to see you like this, Will. Others may only see you sated; I am the one who sees you in need,' he punctuated it with a sharp bite to Will's neck, a wicked little thing, then murmured, 'Now, faster, Will. Do as I say.'

And Will did. Not necessarily because Hannibal had ordered him to, but rather because it had become impossible to contain himself; and his grip turned unforgiving, his strokes diligent, *focused*, and the space around him was blurring. He felt only the throbbing of his cock, the frantic anticipation of climax.

'Good boy,' Hannibal purred, and he seemed blissful as he said it.

*"Fuck,* Hannibal,' Will panted, leaning his head against Hannibal's chest, trying to distract himself from the crude skin-on-skin sounds that rippled through the bathroom.

'Yes, sweetheart, let me help you now. Let me make it better for you.'

Will shook his head, moaning as he felt his balls start to draw up.

'Please, dear, my sweet boy, let me touch you,' Hannibal was begging against Will's ear, and it felt almost impossible to deny him, to refuse the evident urgency in his tone.

But Will had known impossible; he'd known it when he was tied and drugged, when Hannibal had gone on despite his every word. Impossible had felt infinitely more terrifying.

*"No,'* he said, and it was the despair in Hannibal's features - the obscene satisfaction that brought him - that sent Will over the edge. He came with his mouth pressed tightly against Hannibal's shoulder, come spilling on his fingers.

There was silence afterwards. Will panted, hands and thighs shaking. Hannibal stood in complete quiet and marble tense.

'Did it help?' Will asked after a moment, dry, tired smile in place; he could see by Hannibal's state that it hadn't - and he'd known it, he'd known pretending would not fix it, he'd known it was lemon into blood, but it had seemed so *enticing.*

'May I touch you now?' was all Hannibal managed, gaze shifting from Will's eyes to his softening cock.

Will hummed and opened the faucet to his left, washing the come off his hand under the stream of water. The stricken look he found on Hannibal's face made him chuckle.

'Cruel boy,' he lamented, almost proud, *almost*, but ultimately displeased.

It was a little awkward now - the entire situation, with the veil of arousal neatly tucked away. Will had immersed himself in this fantasy in search of something; now, standing on the other end, he felt empty still, and Hannibal, still staring with hooded eyes, hands still thrumming impatiently on Will's thighs, still so wanton, so *enchanted*, belonged to a plane of pretense Will had now left. He wanted to slip away, to recoil from that intense stare.

He began zipping up his pants, only to have Hannibal's hand clamp down on his.

'Please,' he murmured.

'Hannibal-'

*"Will,'* Hannibal breathed, like he couldn't take a second longer of self-restraint, 'Allow me.'

And then he was moving to tenderly wrap his fingers around Will's soft dick, adjusting it in place, cleaning the stray drops of come clinging to the pink skin. Gentle, caring, with the strangest look of chaste worship, and Will was too surprised to say anything. Hannibal zipped him up, straightened the fabric and then, lingering, wistful, he drew a finger down the outline of Will's now clothed cock.

'You're wearing my slacks,' he pointed out.

It hung between them, the reason why. Will chose not to mention it. Instead, he slid down from the counter, standing on his feet again, pressed tight between the vanity and Hannibal's unmoving figure.

He thought perhaps it would be appropriate to say goodbye. Perhaps he could whisper some inelegant absurdity and walk away - and he could banish this sordid moment from his mind, and pretend the last time he'd seen Hannibal had been at the church, or the night of his escape, or even much before, in Baltimore.

Will had decided to do it, had opened his mouth to speak when Hannibal reached for his hand.

'I'd like to present a suggestion.'

Will quirked an eyebrow.

'Drive to the house once the luncheon is over. I shall have your clothes packed. You may take them with you.'

Hannibal looked, in all reality, like he was serious.

Like the complete stupidity of his words was justified.

Like he had a *point*.

And it's a pesky little thing, when someone says something ridiculous in a confident tone: when they mean it enough, and they say it so simplistically, it is easy to doubt.

So Will, instead of leaving, or ignoring, or casting it off, doubted.

'You're crazy.'

'No. Meet me there, darling. I'll give you your clothes if you do. I'll give you whatever sum of money you may wish.'

Will blinked.

'No. No, Hannibal. You cannot expect me to trust you.'

Because it obviously wasn't *true*. Because Will knew Hannibal wanted him to stay - why would he enable his escape in exchange for one more stunted goodbye? Was he that desperate that he'd cling to these morbid meetings when they were nothing anymore? Was his plan to keep staging them and hope Will, out of some unwilling fondness, would keep complying?

It was up to Will to break the pattern. It was up to Will to define an ending for them. A last encounter.

Will remembered how he'd felt when Linette had told him Hannibal hadn't shown. Disappointment had bloomed unbidden in his throat. And thus, seeing Hannibal in the flesh had figured nearly a relief. But now Will, like a recoverer who'd relapsed, was horribly furious, horribly angry that Hannibal had indeed appeared - that Linette's words had not been the beginning of a forever, that he was forced to create this beginning himself.

It was difficult, and Will was torn.

Hannibal dared to kiss his left temple then, a light press of lips.

'You will not have to steal from anyone. You may even say goodbye to your dear Winston.'

There was an irresistible urge to punch Hannibal, then. For the impossibly kind offers which hid in all evidence a trap; for these possibilities he could not, for all the strength in his being, refuse. And Will wanted so desperately to say no, but how could he live forever wondering what would have happened? How could he live without money nor clothes besides the one he wore, flung into homelessness, a stranger everywhere, knowing he could have prevented it? How could he love anything else ever again, knowing he'd loved Winston with all his heart and turned down the chance to see him one final time?

It was ridiculous, and Will knew all his past selves would have said no, and his future ones, in all likelihood, would have - or had - as well. But Will was in the present, tormented by all its unsureties, and forced to choose.

It was ridiculous, but saying no seemed like childish stubbornness, and saying yes seemed like naive hope.

'I wouldn't go in,' he said cautiously, scanning Hannibal's face incessantly, *desperately*, for any clue that'd help his decision.

Hannibal was unperturbed sincerity, fond desire to see him once more time. Nothing more, nothing less.

'Of course. I'd meet you by the front door.'

'Hannibal,' he urged, impatient, *confused, 'Why*?'

Hannibal stared down at their entwined fingers with a look of loss.

'As I said before, my dear Will, I forever wish to say goodbye to you once more.'

It seemed so simple, it seemed so perfect.

He wouldn't have to steal from anyone, he wouldn't be starting off his new life with no money nor possessions. He'd say goodbye to Winston. He'd hug him one final time, explain to his ever-deaf ears why he was leaving, delight in the pure love melting in his chestnut eyes.

And maybe nothing would go wrong, and maybe Will would leave.

'Give me your word, Hannibal,' he demanded, even though he wasn't sure if Hannibal's word had any objective value at all - after all, he'd always been the most harmonious dichotomy of honour and deception, 'Give me your word that this isn't some plan of yours.'

'You have my word,' Hannibal nodded solemnly, promptly, so eager to get Will's confirmation. When Will didn't answer, he quirked his head to the side, 'Do you believe me?'

'No.'

'Will you go anyway?'

Will breathed in. He thought of Linette's trusting eyes and how he'd hate to steal from her. He thought of every single street in every single foreign country, and how cold it could get at night, and how better it would be if he had some spare clothes or some money to book a room. He thought of Winston and tried to remember the last time he'd seen him - tried to remember if he'd treated him kindly, if he'd whispered him goodnight before heading upstairs, if he'd ruffled his fur before he left.

Breathed out. Nodded.

'Yes, I'll go.'

He thought of the dog and the mouse, and wondered why he always walked so freely into its mouth.

Will wasn't an idiot.

He knew he chose poorly.

He knew he'd gotten everything wrong.

Possibly, since his birth.

And he knew the right decision would be not to go. He knew that. The safe decision was never seeing Hannibal again. Logical, simple, and perfectly unquestionable.

Will knew that.

But he also knew he was not a film; he did not cease to exist after the climax. He was there, confetti on the ground, broom in hand. It would have been poetic to never see Hannibal again - like a good ending to a good story, the kind of tragedy one can't seem to mind. It could have been a story.

It wasn't. It was a life, going on and on in endless tides of time, and Will had the same thoughts and feelings he'd had in that house, and nothing was very different. He wasn't stronger. He missed Winston, he feared starting a new life.

He'd miss Hannibal.

So it was the wrong choice, going back, but it wasn't *inexcusable*.

And Will wasn't an idiot.

He was just inconveniently human.

And his moral code was set not on stone engraved principles, but on nuances, which was why he might have hated the idea of stealing money from one of those unsuspecting guests, but he'd had no qualms with slipping the little knife from one of the plates on the table before he left.

It was just a normal knife. Serrated, meant for meals with fibrous protein. Small. Sharp.

Linette wouldn't even remember it existed.

Hannibal had left almost as soon as he'd come with gracious apologies and a charming smile. Will had watched him go from the hallway, leaning against the bathroom's doorframe. It took him an hour longer to leave the party himself. He got a drink, found an empty seat and

obsessed. Drank. Worried. Shifted between resolves so quickly they all crumbled into uncertainty. Got another drink; then another.

When he'd finally made his way to Linette and said his goodbyes, he couldn't help taking the knife. Crossing the pavement with it in hand, wondering how people would react if they saw it.

No one did. No one was there to look.

And so Will had made his way to the truck, thrown the knife on top of the raincoat on the passenger's seat, and clung to the wheel until his knuckles went white.

And then he'd started driving. Up and through the slithering curves, onto the winding road by the beach, those miles of asphalt he'd seen before, that night, when he was moving the opposite direction.

He drove towards the house.

Hoped - prayed, really - that a car would hit him.

He didn't really know what he'd do.

But it felt like he inevitably would before he got there.

Because Will knew it would happen. He could take his hands from the wheel and the car would bring him there; he could turn off the motor and steadily the tires would turn, turn, turn, grinding through the road; he could try to open the door and the lock would click. There was no other option, no thread of his future that spared him from this.

The world was one moment. Will's life was a complete absence of past and irrelevance of future.

It felt, when he saw the house peeking from the distance, like a very pretty nightmare on a daisy blooming hill.

Hannibal was sitting on the porch, a little figure getting closer every minute. On his feet laid Winston.

Will's heart clenched.

It was stupid, love. Incredibly too physical in its pain.

The truck trudged along the dirt path. He was close enough, close *enough*, but he wanted to park as close as possible. His little shell of metal, tied so irrevocably with every string of freedom he'd kept, a route of safety, a reminder that the universe was not just plains of sand and italian skies.

Hannibal stood up, patting Winston's head. Beside him was a dark brown bag.

And it was time, and Will found he still didn't know what to do. But it didn't matter, in any sense - when had it made a difference? What was life if not arbitrary? If not someone else's wants?

He turned off the engine. It went impossibly quiet. And he glanced at the raincoat to his side, at the knife laying gently atop it.

Looked at Hannibal, at the dark shadow he cast amidst the grass.

In the end, he put on the raincoat. The knife went to his pocket.

And he left. Opened the door, crunched beads of sand with his feet, closed it back with a dull thud. The sun shone in his eyes, the house was still glass and wood and foreign retreats.

He couldn't help glimpsing at the shutters on the top floor, the ones that belonged to his bedroom. How often had he opened them to stare forlornly at the dirt path, at the horribly empty air, at the *freedom*? Had he ever in his wildest dreams, in his obsessive pessimism, pictured himself returning?

No. Will had thought he'd die there.

He walked closer to the porch, just a little bit, closing half the distance. Hannibal stared at him from up the pair of steps, looking pleasantly surprised.

Winston, eyes glued to Will, was barking animatedly, tail swinging, ears happily perked, a little patter of his paws on the wood as he tried to release himself from Hannibal's grip on his collar, so that he could run to meet Will.

It was the prettiest sight, one Will had convinced himself he wouldn't see again.

He wanted to drop his knees to the ground and cry.

He didn't. Since Hannibal seemed satisfied with silence, he was the one to speak:

'Let him come to me, please.'

Hannibal hummed. Will assumed so, at least. He curled his lip like he usually did when he hummed, but he was too far away to tell.

It was strange, seeing him there now, believing in the continuity between this man and the desperate soul he'd met in Linette's house. Still, *impossibly* they were one and the same - his clothes still a bit dishevelled, his hair a little ruffled, and a light in his eye, a brazen hope that reflected burnt orange roofs and ugly orange tiles.

'I was beginning to think you wouldn't show,' Hannibal said calmly over Winston's barking.

'No, you weren't.'

How could he, when Will hadn't either?

'Hannibal. Let him go.'

A pulse of waiting. Then, Hannibal did.

Winston came running immediately, and Will was sinking in the sand, arms stretched, and something inside him was unfurling into unbearable need. When Winston jumped into his arms, a frenzy of heat and fur and greeting tongue, there was nothing else, and Will felt like an absolute idiot, an unforgivable sinner, for he had let Winston behind, had thought of moving on without him, and it was truly, utterly *inconceivable*, and this was the only love he didn't deserve, the only love he dared to match, and he'd *missed him*.

'Hi, boy, how are you?' he uttered into Winston's fur, scratching his ear, holding onto him with shaking arms, 'How's he been treating you, huh?'

'I fear I've spoilt him,' answered Hannibal, tone light with the kind of amusement that melts to fond. Will idly registered that he'd gotten closer, that he stood a few steps away with his hands behind his back and a delighted look, but he didn't care - he didn't fucking *care*, because Hannibal and the solidity of his life could stay lurking in the background for a while longer.

Winston was licking his cheek with avid dedication, paws pressing against Will's chest. It made Will laugh, short little bursts that invariably dissolved to sighs.

He wondered if he could convince Hannibal to part with Winston. If he kissed him again, if he lied again, would it help?

Hannibal's steps dug softly into the sand, bending little stems of grass. He went around the entangled mass that was Will and Winston, legs barely grazing Will's back, a hand so gentle in Will's curls.

'Are you happy?' he murmured.

Will thought about it for a moment. In the floor, in the dirt, the sunlight golden on his skin, the house just out of sight, and Winston so simple against him, yapping so contently, his eyes glistening with the easiest bliss, he thought that it couldn't be that difficult to mirror that feeling. He could, if he wanted to. The daisies could bloom and the skies could be bluer. It could be better. He could be happy, if he tried.

'I don't know.'

And he felt, in that moment, that something was terribly wrong.

'We could have been. We will be.'

And it wasn't Hannibal's words, it was a millisecond *before* that - it was the fact that Hannibal was behind him, and the fact that his hand had dropped to his neck, but it wasn't caressing, it was *holding*. It was an instant of panic, an instant to move, and in that instant too much happened. Will tried to stand, and he turned back to *make sure*, and of course Hannibal had lied - what did his word even mean, what was it worth when he spoke so much? -, and of

course it was a trap - Will always chose poorly - and Hannibal had a needle in his hand, inches from his neck, and everything turned to white light.

It was, as Will had thought in the car, all meant to be.

It was all out of his control.

It had not been his choice to take the knife.

It had just happened.

And he'd just put it in his pocket, and it was just *there*, and Will grabbed it.

It sunk into Hannibal's flesh.

The blade disappeared so swiftly, so smoothly. Cutting blood and meat and tissue.

Winston stopped barking. It was all very quiet.

He'd stabbed Hannibal.

And he knew, just as he'd known everything else, that this was what it had all led to. This was the goodbye they'd been rehearsing.

This was the end.

He slashed the knife to the side. It made way through Hannibal's flesh, a wide gash in his lower belly.

All blood, all open, this skin he'd once kissed.

And it was darkly poetic, to see its insides now. So long they'd prodded each other's minds; now Will saw, in all reality, the inside of this man.

He'd expected black blood. He'd expected something that echoed the stag.

It was all human. It was all soft. It was all *mortal.*

Hannibal's eyes were very wide. He looked at Will, unseeing. He stumbled, knees giving in, and caught himself with a hand on Will's shoulder.

Will moved to support him. Knife and needle fell to the floor.

'Will,' Hannibal whispered. He looked *betrayed*.

Had Will betrayed him? Had they not both known what was to happen?

There was blood in his teeth.

'I know,' Will said, hushed, tender, and eased Hannibal to the ground, holding him in his arms.

'Will.'

'I know.'

He didn't know. He'd stabbed Hannibal. Hannibal would *die.* Years of knowing him, of loving him, of hating him, and now all this love and hate would linger without a body to hold onto. Hannibal would die, and was this what he wanted?

It wasn't. But he'd known - he'd always known - that it would happen. That one of them would die by each other's hand. It was an intuitive truth like no other; something he could see in the air, the earth, the gush of blood down Hannibal's torso.

It was the world's design.

Hannibal coughed. He looked paler. A corpse, almost.

'You'll leave me here.'

Will nodded.

Hannibal seemed resigned. Small, hurt, laying on the floor.

Heartbroken.

'You'll let me die.'

And that's what this had all amounted to, wasn't it? Would they die together or die alone?

Will pressed his lips together, then forced himself to meet Hannibal's eyes, the maroon that turned redder with his blood.

'*Will* you die?'

Hannibal struggled to hold his head high, glancing at the wide cut in his middle.

'I think I might.'

He might. Perhaps he wouldn't. Hannibal was not the type of person that died.

But if he survived, it would not be by Will's hand. This was the end of Will's intervention. Hannibal was on his own.

Goodbye, Hannibal,' he said, and it was the last time they'd ever say it.

Hannibal smiled, a sad little thing that wavered and cracked.

His lips were stained red, these lips Will had kissed, these lips which would rot to nothing. He was death a moment about to happen.

"Goodbye, Will.'

Will nodded. If he said anything else his voice would crack, his heart would break, and he'd never leave.

He kissed Hannibal's forehead, stood up and let him die.

---

It was a quarter to midnight.

The train station was empty.

Winston laid at his feet, staring placidly at the train tracks.

Will sat on a bench, ticket in hand, dark brown bag beside him, and didn't think.

Didn't think about anything, anyone, because he didn't know anything any longer.

He was someone else.

Will Graham was over.

He'd done it. He'd won. He was the only winner, the only one left standing, trembling and tearing, in their makeshift arena.

It was over.

And ahead of him was an empty life. A tedious, unremarkable, miserable life, like Will had always wanted. He'd take odd jobs, live somewhere ugly and small, find some town next to the sea - and if the water reminded him of Hannibal, he'd retire to the mountains, and if that didn't help he'd move again, and again, and again, for he had no ties anywhere now, no reason to stay.

He was free.

It didn't seem possible. It felt like, at any moment, from some shadowed corner, someone would come to take it all away. Will didn't get happy endings - he was forever in anguished middles.

But now, it was done. Now, he'd earned it. He had not run, and he had not cowered - each time he'd faced the stag and held his gaze. He could turn his back now, and there'd be no one left to chase him.

Will was safe.

And he wanted to cry. He wanted to cry so much, but he held off his tears. In the train, when he was being carried away, when there was nothing but metal and stars and blurry rows of houses around him, he'd cry. He'd cry until he was red, until his stomach hurt, and he'd be a child once again, so horribly relieved that they'd escaped from the monster's grip.

A rumbling of carriages came clicking in the distance. Will stood up, bag in hand, and walked closer to the edge of the platform, the wind whipping his face. Winston stayed close beside him, nudging his leg.

Then, he barked.

Will glanced at him, surprised. Winston was looking to their left.

There was a woman there. Black hair, black coat. In the middle of the platform, no luggage, melting into the night.

She had a gun.

There was a noise. Pain. Will fell to the ground; his vision blurred - was there still wind, was there any blood still within him? Winston lapped worryingly at his face, and it was so sweet, and Will was dying.

And Will thought: of course.

Of course he'd die.

And Will thought, as he slipped into unconsciousness, that he really would have liked to see Wolf Trap one final fime.

Chapter End Notes

See you in the next chapter ;-)

Edit: there's been some confusion so I'd like to stress that this is NOT the end, not even NEAR the end of the fic!

# Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Jesus fucking christ, we're back.

My friends, my readers, I am the pamphlet photo of apologies. I am so sorry for the wait. But I did it, chapter six is finally here!

Okay, I really wanted to have something nice & pretty here for you in the starter notes, but I've been marathon writing and editing since Thursday to get this ready before the end of the weekend (because God forbid I'd post this on a fucking Monday, that's just heresy), so my brain is not working enough to leave something clever here :-/

It's Sunday, the chapter is around an hour and a half, so you guys should be able to just sit back and enjoy the story. Know that it's obviously still not over - far from the end, really - and I'll see you in the next one~ <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He thought, for a while, that he was dead.

The back of his eyelids were black, and they didn't feel like eyelids at all - it felt like he had shrunk very little and sunk into the bottom of his skull, and meters above him was his face, pale, slack and lifeless, and he could try to will himself up, lift his hand and stretch his fingers, but he couldn't reach it, couldn't twitch a muscle, flutter an eyelash, force the briefest puff of air from his nose. His face was intact, but it wasn't his; it was an extrinsic object which melted indifferently into the world, a group of arbitrary features in a body he had no control over, and so, having nothing, *belonging* to nothing, what was he but dead?

These little moments of death were peaceful. He sat cross-legged in his cranium, back against the dip that lead to his nape; and with his ear to porous bone he heard faint shuffling noises from outside and wondered if they'd ever cease, or if he'd be buried and still hear the wiggling of worms behind his head. It was all dark, quiet and monotonous in the solemn promise of an eternity.

Then, something shifted. Something which had been compressing him flat against bone grew weaker, and Will grew a little bigger, found he could kneel, found that his face was not that high up.

Found he was not dead after all.

He thought then, perhaps, that he was in a coma.

He liked the sound of it, and settled down once more. Death would surely be less than that, but life was surely more. He was in between. It figured, quite honestly, the best place to be.

Time stretched, and, if Will focused, he still couldn't find his body - in delirium he'd chase the feel of his feet, his heart, his skin or blood, and there was nothing there; less than nothing, for it was not the absence of what he'd once so indifferently taken for granted. It was a progressive forgetting of what a body felt like; it was not knowing, apart from some withered notion, what he was supposed to be feeling at all.

His body had gone, then. He'd be nestled in the unused corners of his skull until one day, as fluidly as a slip in silk, he'd be that little bit less, and he'd die.

He'd made his peace with it when he woke up.

It was merciless. It hurt. A sudden, inexcusable awareness of skin and blood; fingers twisting in his hair and *pulling* him up from the confines of his skull, up toward the world - he was spit out, expelled forward, and he breathed in, and he was awake.

Will opened his eyes. As the light rushed to his pupils, the nook inside his head became impossibly far.

How strange: so long he'd remembered staying there, and now it was nowhere at all.

Well, he wasn't dead, nor in a coma. He could glimpse down and see the form of his body stretching under a white cover. He could blink. He could think. And there was one ethereal second where Will was Will Graham exempt of context; detached from time and space and thus untethered to his past. He was hovering perfectly an inch from his life.

He recognized the shutters, then.

Recognized the dresser, thought strange that the little potted plant was no longer on it. Knew that he'd slept in that bed before, he'd struggled under scorching muscle between those covers, he'd muffled weak breaths in those pillows as his stomach ate itself away - he'd left it in deathly quiet not to rouse a dozing monster, he'd locked the door firmly shut and vowed never to find himself there again.

Will Graham was still in Italy.

He was still in that house.

Days and days had gone, a lifetime's worth in pain, and he was bound to the beginning - and perhaps, if the universe was just a little crueler than usual, Hannibal would come to greet him like he had in his first night there, and Will would ask him to brush a thread of hair out of his eye again, and the circle would begin anew. Everything the same, countlessly, and the moment he fell on the cold ground of the train station, the moment the last bead of blood dripped from his brain, was followed by a brief intermission and a reopening of the curtain - a room, a bed, a new show.

Perhaps the world would be a little more merciful, and let him die the second time around.

Placidly, almost disinterestedly, Will laid his eyes on the small cut of blue sky he could see through the window. It was light, sunny enough, a bright morning, perhaps an early afternoon.

He wondered how long he'd slept. Wondered why he couldn't have slept longer. Wondered why he had to sleep at all - why he couldn't have gone in that little night train, metal rumbling against his back, far and farther away under endless black skies.

Wondered where Winston was.

Where Hannibal was.

If his blood was still drying on the train platform.

If he'd leave a stain.

And he wondered where the blood had come from. His torso didn't feel bound - perhaps his legs, then? But his body was covered and he couldn't see, and he couldn't *feel*, and he'd seen so much blood pour out of him but he couldn't remember from *where*.

He considered pushing the sheet away and peeking, but what good could come of it? White wraps over ripped flesh, antiseptic over pierced bone; how would he benefit from seeing it?

In any case, he didn't even know if he could move. His hand felt heavy - his head, that was pure lead sinking into the pillow. Will probably couldn't move, and he'd been paralyzed often enough to know he preferred ignorance to surety.

So Will waited. He laid in that bed, inside his unused body, still feeling very much like a cadaver - except the steel had been exchanged for feathers, and the white mortuary light was now Italian sunlight.

Eventually, he saw the doorknob turn and the door open.

Hannibal walked into the room, a book in hand, a slow, slurred step - silk robe, shoulders tight in discomfort, and an utterly, shockingly, *uniquely* surprised look on his face as he noticed Will staring back.

His eyes were beautiful dark brown, the most beautiful eyes Will had ever seen, and Will had *killed* him, he'd *left* him with his blood slithering down sand and grass, and he thought he'd never see those eyes again, *Hannibal* again, and Will hated him so dearly, so *necessarily* in his life, that in the end it was all crippling love and horrible heartache.

He'd killed Hannibal, and his life hadn't changed; he'd thought, emboldened, that maybe he could move on.

It was evident now that his life had only not ended for Hannibal's hadn't either. Had he reaped Hannibal's soul with that slash of blade and he wouldn't have made it a step further - he would have died right there with him, and that little stupid unnamed village would have found a butchered man and his lover dead from grief beside him, and thought: oh, how much they must have loved each other.

Presently, Hannibal was still frozen in place, and Will took the moment - for one's mind never seems to focus on solemn things when solemn times come - to observe how domestically ruffled Hannibal's hair could look, a little self-contained chaos of shimmering silver.

'Will,' Hannibal said, and his voice seemed to be edging on a flood of emotions, 'You're awake.'

Will tried to nod, but his neck was tense. Tried to speak, but his throat constricted.

Hannibal began to move towards the bed; a more careless movement made him wince, and he stopped, a hand resting on his middle, above the skin Will had sliced.

'I… I'll fetch some water.'

And he left, trying to conceal the pained way in which he moved. Will frowned - and he remembered sitting in his little corner inside his skull, wondering if he'd ever frown again -, for Hannibal should be in bedrest, bored and atrophied, feeling tissue bind and regenerate.

Will had gutted him; he'd seen his body crumble into the sand. How was it that Hannibal was walking, while Will laid immobile in bed?

How long had it been since the train platform, since Linette's party, since their encounter at the church or the very night he'd escaped? Will had no time, no sense of continuity, only a stream of muddled thoughts - and when he slowly pushed himself up, sitting with a heavy head against the headboard, and looked out the window more closely, he could not say if that sky belonged to autumn or spring; if it had been a day, or a month, or four decades; if Jack and Alana were dead, and he'd find in the mirror an older, infinitely sadder version of himself, all the while Hannibal watched unbothered, unchanged, exempt of time.

And Will, with movements haphazard and stunted, with his vision beginning to blur in orange pulses, and a pressure in his forehead, like something meant to split the skin and break the bone there, brought a hand to his bare chest and searched for the softness in his skin; threw the covers off him to be reassured by the sight of still young, firm legs.

He saw, instead, a lot of gauze.

It wound around his left thigh, tight and antiseptic white. The skin around it was purple, his leg thin and shrivelled. He was completely bare except for underwear, and one grey tube disappeared under the fabric. Will trailed a finger over it idly, and quickly realized that he'd been fitted a catheter.

Well, it wasn't unexpected. He'd been dead, hadn't he? It made sense that his sleeping body would be sustained by wires. It made sense. He'd been useless. He'd needed help.

Will had been right, earlier, when he'd so purposefully kept the covers over him. He would have been better off not seeing it.

Hannibal returned just as Will's headache had begun to subside. He stood for one moment by the threshold, seeming still so utterly shocked at the fact that Will was staring back. Shocked

and consumed by relief; fluttering lightly around Will, careful not to rouse him, scared he might once more disappear.

Once the spell broke and his composure returned, he moved to sit gingerly on the edge of the bed, glass of water in hand.

'How do you feel?' he asked, eyes raking over Will's face, then the plains of his bare body, down his torso, to his bandaged thigh.

Will didn't answer; he was thinking on how often Hannibal had seen him when he couldn't in turn see Hannibal; how often Hannibal had touched him - to tend to his wounds, to reassure himself that he was still there - while he was asleep. Had his contact strayed from clinical? Had he kissed his slack lips, run a finger down the exposed plains of his chest? Had he been playing lovers while Wil played dead?

He took the glass, watched the water swish up to the brims as his hand trembled, brought it to his lips and drank carefully.

It felt a little better, after the water. It felt a little better, being in that bed again, with *Hannibal* again, *stuck* again. It felt a little better, and Will felt a little more like himself.

He asked, voice coming out small and rough:

‘How long have I been out?’

Hannibal smiled sadly at him.

‘It would have been the fourth day today.’

Will nodded, his gaze skittering down, away from Hannibal, resting on his leg. The softest tremor rumbled across his left cheek, and Will hoped Hannibal hadn’t seen – hoped Hannibal thought him unaffected, hoped he couldn’t peek into the tempest inside his mind, for Will had been asleep for *four* days, resting limply - *uselessly* – in that small bed, in that smaller bedroom, in the suffocating inch of earth that was Italy. He’d been there, playing house inside his skull, lounging in curves of bone and strolling through tunnels in his head, so content in his retreat, so cowardly in his contentment, for four entire – four now hopelessly lost – days.

‘How?’ he murmured, disbelieving, staring at the gauze around his thigh. It seemed so *harmless*.

A friend of his had been shot in the leg, when Will was in the academy. He’d limped his way throughout the rest of the day, an old shirt knotted tightly over the wound.

Hannibal hummed, gently taking the glass from Will’s hand and placing it on the bedside table. He moved a little closer, so that his hip was now an inch from Will’s. Will could see the urge to touch; could see the effort Hannibal was exerting not to engulf Will in his arms, not to kiss him, not to seek proof of Will's life with his own fingers - it was evident in the longing tenderness in his eyes, in the way his body thrummed with ill-contained want.

How curious would it be, if it happened. Will could picture it so clearly: the two of them, so recently dead, brimming with life in each other's embrace.

‘Chiyoh hit an artery. You had lost a lot of blood when you were finally brought back here. Of course, she did not have the medical knowledge required to help, and I was… not in fitting form. My work on you was subpar. I did not have the equipment nor the dexterity to treat you properly,’ and then Hannibal’s eyes grew a shade softer, sadder, ‘I feared you’d die.’

And Will could see it: so clear, like the water on the birdbath by the church, like when Will had refused to speak and Hannibal had wandered around the house in a jumble of nerves, steps ever tracing those stairs, lurking at Will’s door to then go down and fume over shifting symphonies; except this time Will was pale and closed-eyed, and Hannibal’s pacing was more solemn, more subdued - a funeral march.

He cleared his throat, pointedly refusing to meet Hannibal's eyes.

'Chiyoh? The woman from the plane?'

'Yes. She stayed in our proximity, in case we ever needed assistance.'

There was something in his posture, in his tightly wound composure, that hinted to a strange kind of pain: a self-imposed detachment struggling with a brittled restraint; a restless kneading of muscle under skin. He didn't seem quite like himself. Hannibal did not seem the murderer, nor the doctor, nor the man; he'd shedded all these facets Will had known, and he wavered now between them - death and life and vulnerable domesticity.

But Will didn't have the patience to approach it. He didn't have the *reason* to approach it - Hannibal's convoluted masks were much better ignored. Instead, he moved on to more pertinent things.

'Did you tell her to shoot me?'

Hannibal's response was immediate:

'I did.'

Will nodded to himself, a wry huff escaping him. Of course he had; of course he admitted it now so simply, in the most unnerving candour, like friendships meant blood and the world spun to abide it, like Will had stabbed him and Hannibal had had him shot, and it was definitely not fine but it was perfectly *understandable*.

'Did you tell her to hit an artery?'

There was a pause, and then, to Will's amazement, against the sunlit room, enclosed by the clear-coloured walls, Hannibal went dark with a powerless sort of guilt, a repentance perhaps not for the order, but for the outcome.

'I told her to make you stay.'

Will didn't answer, leaving a lingering break in the conversation. Hannibal stared at him, trying to gouge out his thoughts with that veiled sort of anxiety Will had long ago learnt to discern - it was an ill-fitting look for Hannibal; too subtle to wear proudly, shifting its weight nervously behind his mask, this neurotic unease that made his cheekbones snap and his jaws sharpen.

'Is there anything you wish? I could prepare some tea,' he asked at last, some idle attempt at continuing their exchange.

Will didn't really bite. He wanted it to be over. He wanted Hannibal to leave.

'I'm fine. I think I'd like to rest now.'

Hannibal took the dismissal for what it was and rose with dignity, smoothing over the edges of his robe. Any hint of hurt was scrupulously filed away, and he nodded pleasantly:

'Of course,' he stepped away, and then, clenching his fists in one dooming moment of hesitation, he hesitated - and, in an act which could not be perceived as anything besides a complete faltering of his self-control, Hannibal leaned and pressed one chaste and utterly self-indulgent kiss to Will's forehead, 'Rest well, Will.'

He left. Will's eyes lingered on the door long after it'd closed, long after he'd gone and the room, gradually, shifting in its shades, went a little lighter, a little yellower, a little cooler from the tendrilled breeze.

He laid back down, then. Submitted to the insidious headache which had settled. He looked at his leg, all small and helpless, shrivelled, so pale, like it didn't even belong to him, and roughly pulled the covers over it. Turning his head from the window and its insufferably blue sky and warm light, he chased sleep.

He remembered his friend in the academy again. He'd barely slowed down. Will had been shot in the leg - in the *thigh*, and wasn't that all flesh and blood, and why couldn't he have *run*? - and he'd lost everything.

When sleep finally did come, that thought still lingered in his mind, helpless and numb.

He felt like the weakest person he'd ever met.

---

When Will woke, the night had set, bathing the room in gentle whites.

For the course of two slow, sticky blinks, he was held still in the numb limbo of sleep; gradually, clarity saw fit to reappear, and he became aware with acute certainty of one thing.

His leg hurt.

A lot.

And Will thought that perhaps, had he any medical knowledge, it would have hurt less. Were he more mindful of the human body, were he aware of the names of each bone and each muscle, and the pain would not be pain, but a rapture of such muscles and a shatter of those bones, and Will would know precisely how worrisome it was, and thus how painful it ought to be.

But Will wasn't a doctor. What he knew - and even so he knew it in horribly abstract terms - was that he'd been shot in the thigh, and that an artery had been struck. There were no cleanly clinical terms to make it seem reasonable; Will only knew that a bullet had pierced his skin, had dug through his flesh and burst capillary, arteriole and artery; only knew that *foreign metal* had lodged in his leg, *inside* him, and that Hannibal had shuffled to get it out, to sew back what had been butchered - he knew only this, in these terrifyingly barbaric vagueness, and likewise the pain seemed of unimaginable cruelty.

He threw the covers off him once more, gazing at his bandaged thigh, half-hoping that crimson had stained the gauze - that some unordinary thing had happened, and the pain was an anomaly.

The gauze was pristine white. The pain was trite.

It was this, then, that awaited him. It was this which stood in his horizon, waving him by with a sympathetic smile.

Will took in the static sight of his body, prostrated on the mattress with limbs limp and skin sickly, nearly entirely unclothed, bare and vulnerable in the nurturing moonlight. At least the catheter was gone - he could no longer see the thin tube that disappeared under his boxers; a courtesy of Hannibal's hand, perhaps, to remove it while he was out. But he was still in all appearances a corpse; he was still dead, shrunken, a body slack and vacant of soul.

He hated it. He *hated* it.

And then, because the moonlight's stillness, in its dark complicity, was always conducive to bad ideas, and because Will thirsted for some silly delusion of independence - a meaningless reaffirmation of self-sufficiency -, he moved, placing his feet on the cold floor.

The pain was blinding. He felt, for a moment, like he might die from it.

It made Will want more. Because *now*, now with these insignificant deeds, the sleep wore off, the lingering comfort of his skull dissolved, and Will was all there, and why the *fuck* was he there? Was he really there at all, had he failed so spectacularly? How the *fuck* had that happened? And it was the most disenchanting heartbreak, the most dispassionate embrace of atheism - for if God existed, and he'd seen how much Will had *fought*, then, no matter how

cruel, he would have done him the mercy of killing him in that train platform, so that he might have at least, in some way or another, escaped. But no, Will was alive, and his leg had been shot and it *hurt,* but he could endure it - his friend at the academy had, every hero of every story did, and Will would as well; and perhaps, were he to try hard enough, the pain would be too much, and he'd crumble on the floor, the terribly weak man he was, and die at last.

And in this conflicting struggle, caught between a flickering side of him which wished still to prove his strength, and another side, a bitter, defeated one, which was instead morbidly attracted to his own weakness, wanting to provoke it, to show it to the world, to beat it with a stick until it broke and he drowned in hatred and self-pity, Will tried to stand.

It happened quickly, and there must have been a *millisecond* of hope - his muscles tensed, stretched, and he rose from the bed, and it almost worked.

Then, his weight evened to his left foot.

It felt like he'd stepped on an upturned nail - rusty, long, sharp - and, as the metal sunk into his flesh, it grew longer and longer, until an iron rod was imbedded in bone, through his kneecap and upper, lodging in his pelvis.

He quickly swiped his foot off the floor, eyesight blurring from the pain; his head spun, and he thought he'd faint, but he was simply falling, and he scrambled for something to hold onto with one blind, outstretched arm. His spine hit the edge of the bed, biting at the wooden frame; his legs gave out fully; his hand dug into the corner of the bedside table, fingers feverishly splaying on the surface to try and hoist himself up - but he just ended up pushing the table away, its narrow legs scratching the wooden floors; the lamp toppled over and shattered on the floor.

It was a lot of noise. A succession of dull thuds punctuated by the clatter of glass.

Silence, then.

Will fought the urge to laugh.

It was pathetic.

Absolutely fucking miserable.

On the floor, in the dark, surrounded by shards of glass, the weakness had won, and Will thought: why had he ever bothered being strong?

He was bleeding from a cut on his hand. Must have gripped the edge of the table too hard.

It didn't hurt. His leg didn't really hurt either.

Will wondered: were he to plunge a shard of glass into his neck, would he feel anything before he bled out?

The silence was broken by a rising of footsteps; they neared as they crossed the hall toward his room. Hannibal would enter the room in his nonchalant poise, and perhaps he'd smile in good humour, or perhaps he'd tut disapprovingly, or tuck him back into bed with gentle arms - either way, Will would throw him every glass piece in reach until his skin was crisscrossed red.

But Hannibal didn't come.

It was a woman, in fact, who opened the door.

Dressed completely in black.

She looked very much like she did in the train platform, that night days ago, when she'd shot him.

Will looked up at her, and she looked down at him, and every shred of violence faded away. Everything was very quiet, and Will was very small.

'Would you help me up?'

The woman walked over, boots crunching dryly over glass, and hoisted him up deftly, placing his arm over her lean shoulders. Her clothes scratched at his bare skin, and he devoted one second to feeling embarrassed over the fact that he was only wearing underwear; then, the thought faded, and Will cocked his left leg so he didn't have to place much weight over it, leaning on Chiyoh with the uninhibited indifference that pain tends to bring.

'What were you trying to do?' she asked, one eyebrow perfectly arched amid her forehead.

Her accent was soft. She spoke like every word was carefully strung along; like she was fluent within a slim amount of words - one hundred, two hundred -, and she changed them, moved them around in her concise tone to translate all that she ever thought.

'Bathroom.'

'You lost a lot of blood.'

Will nodded; then, sensing Chiyoh's monotone reluctance, he added softly:

'Please.'

The word was uttered; it hung small in the darkness, and with it Will broke a little bit. There he was, and there Chiyoh was, and this was how they met - Will bleeding on the floor, Chiyoh the ethereal witness to his demise.

She seemed to consider it for a moment: her face a set of delicate lines; below, a little flittering of hands, the briefest snap of indecisive fingers.

'There's a wheelchair downstairs. I'll bring it up for you.'

'No,' because that picture - him being wheeled around, limp and lifeless, dwindling in his seat until he was all viscous blood and skin sticking to the wheels - was too much for him, and it wasn't *needed*, 'No, it's fine. I can walk. Just- just help me up, would you?'

Once more, a beat of pensive silence. Then, she nodded once, curtly, her one sign of recognition, and swept the scattered glass to the side with one boot. He placed his foot down gingerly and they walked out the room together, Will wobbling with clenched teeth, molar digging into molar with every fiber of self-restraint; Chioyh in her unperturbed entirety, her unruffled outer shell, like she was impervious to the man clinging to her; like Will was not even touching her, but hovering one millimeter short; and as she walked him down the hall in the silence of the house, and Will stared at those impassive features, and found that mask to be indissociable from her essence - perhaps her essence in full, and the mask was not truly one, only a vagueness of emotion that left the misconception of hidden depths -, Will knew that, just like himself, nothing else could touch her: not the rain when it fell, sliding from the atoms atop her skin; not the smiles she drew, hanging a neutrino away from her lips.

They were barely halfway across the hall - and Will's leg was not human flesh anymore, he could swear it; it was butter, or cotton, or jumbles of bloodied gauze -, when further rustling was heard, and Hannibal's voice rose above their quiet steps.

'Will?'

Made low through sleep, urgent through concern, the word travelled from the confines of Hannibal's bedroom. Will's heart quickened, and he felt Chiyoh's arm tighten round the middle of his back; a more insistent push forward, an order to move quicker.

'Everything is fine, Mr. Lecter,' she said, loud and assuring. Will's heart quickened as he waited for a reply, and he felt Chiyoh's arm tighten round the middle of his back; a more insistent push forward, an order to move quicker.

For a few moments, there was only silence, and Will's spirits lightened; perhaps Hannibal had trusted Chiyoh - as he'd trusted her to *shoot* him - and settled in his bed once more. He thought it, he *hoped* - Hannibal's door swung open, and Hannibal, chest flared and stance tense, appeared, in the same robe from earlier, jumbled in a contradiction of disconcerted softness and concerned urgency.

He caught sight of them: Chiyoh in her impeccable strength, her perfumed detachment from the world; Will in a suppressed litany of pained sounds, a mess of useless muscles. His gaze turned instantly darker, infinitely more worried, and he stepped in their direction.

'Has something happened?' he asked, glancing minutely at Will's injured leg.

'No,' Chiyoh was pulling Will forward unrelentingly, coaxing him to keep moving, 'I am only helping him to the bathroom. Rest, Mr. Lecter.'

Will found it in him to nod, focusing on the way Chiyoh's nails dug into his shoulders, the pitch in which his muscles begged him to fall and melt into the floor.

'I'll help you, then,' Hannibal answered quickly, resolutely, already moving toward them. Will's heart quickened at a rabbit's pace, and he was stunned by the impulse to run, but Hannibal did not reach for him - couldn't, for Chiyoh had delicately placed herself between them.

'You are still recovering,' she stated calmly, 'I will take care of this.'

Hannibal's eyes shaded blood red for a moment; they were heavy on Will, taking in his figure, so evidently in *need*, and looking like he so ardently wanted to help, to be the one Will clung to, to murmur encouraging phrases as they moved. He sought Will's gaze at last, and Will could see the brimming of frustration, the violent burn of possessiveness swirling in his expression.

They were deathly emotions, but not *saintly* ones - not something Will was unfamiliar with, not something he was scared to displease, so he shrugged with one shoulder, inching closer to Chiyoh:

'You really shouldn't be doing any heavy lifting.'

For one millisecond, Hannibal huffed - insulted, it seemed -, clenching his fists like a petulant child who'd been denied their favourite toy. Will almost expected a foot to be stomped, or a nail to gash smoothly across Chiyoh's throat. But, as quickly as it'd come, nearly imperceptible, the outburst went, and what was left was the picture of etiquette, a firmness of features in a concession of terse politeness.

'I shall wait here, then.'

Chiyoh nudged him forward, supporting him as he limped the rest of the way to the bathroom. He could *feel* Hannibal's gaze burrowing into his shriveled leg, and it made him swallow down the pain and walk a little faster, leaning so heavily on Chiyoh, sealing himself inside the bathroom as soon as he could reach the doorknob.

After the door clicked shut, he leaned against it with a thud, fit the side of his hand inside his mouth, bit teeth into flesh and pretended - for since a young age he'd learnt not to make a scene - to scream. He pretended, and his throat tensed from silent sound, and his leg *hurt*, and he *couldn't* walk, it was ridiculous - he was crippled, and here he was in this pathetic display of denial, thrown over Chiyoh's shoulder and dragged like a rag doll, and Hannibal was out there, in that corridor - and he shouldn't have to *think* about that corridor at all anymore, because he'd *escaped*!, he'd left, he'd been *gone*.

And he was back now.

And he couldn't walk.

And out there, Hannibal was waiting, faded from his own wound, coloured all pastel, a recipient to all that inherent humanity - those words, those thoughts, that mind, that *darkness*.

And he couldn't leave.

So he might have learnt not to make a scene, but inside he was a child, red-faced and swollen-eyed, stomping his foot and screaming himself hoarse, little fists powerless against a brick wall. He yelled, and yelled - muted, with his teeth sinking into his hand - until the little child was tired and fell asleep, lulled by the humming of his own sadness.

Then, he let his hand slip from his mouth, and reverted back to static silence and cool tiles, and pretended it hadn't happened.

He did everything slowly, lamely, with hisses of pain he'd bitterly swallowed in Chiyoh's presence. He pissed; he washed his hands, watching as the stray droplets of blood from the cut on his hand spiralled down the drain. He examined himself in the mirror: he looked thinner, paler, like there was no blood under his skin, and his complexion was now yellowed white. His eyes were weary, sunken; his hair disheveled, his lips a tense, pained line. Will really wished it didn't look like himself - he could pretend, then. But the shape of his nose was the same; so was the grey in his irises, the brown in his hair - little things so alike himself that he couldn't dissociate from the ghost in the mirror.

They were the same. He was him.

And he waited, once he was done. He took his time, wanting to stretch this moment of simplicity for as long as possible. Wanting to delay the conflict beyond the door, Hannibal and his questioning, eager looks.

With a breath, he placed his hand back on the doorknob. His leg was falling - it was hanging by a thread, it was swinging in the breeze, it wasn't his, it was a *log* - and Will was genuinely scared that, were he to venture another step, his brittle bones would snap and he'd never walk again. But he *knew* it wouldn't happen: his life was not poetic; it was drama but not tragedy; his leg wouldn't give out, he wouldn't scream in anguish; he'd drag himself silently to his room, fall asleep in pain, and it would all be purely tedious suffering.

At last, he opened the bathroom door.

Hannibal stood there alone.

Beside a wheelchair.

Will's grip on the doorknob went very tight.

'Chiyoh was kind enough to bring it up for you. You seemed tired enough already, I was not sure you'd manage the journey back,' Hannibal said with a small, hesitant smile; and in that moment Will wanted nothing more than to reach into his torso and pry his fingers between sewn-together flesh, and reopen that gash he'd created all those days ago - that had seemed, in the moment, so life-changing; that was now ignored, and brushed aside, and hidden under silk, while his life remained the *same*, and Hannibal pulled him infinitely closer.

'Call Chiyoh back,' he uttered, tersely rooted to his spot despite the dull hurt in his bones, the acid corroding his leg.

Hannibal's eyebrows raised.

'There's no need for that. I can help you to your room myself.'

'I don't *want* you to.'

He felt petulant, and he promptly lowered his gaze.

'Frankly, Will, is now the time for this?' Hannibal seemed disapproving, and it made something in Will go very cold.

'Call Chiyoh or I'm staying here.'

Hannibal gave him a once-over. His stare was cold too - like they each froze from each other's words until the corridor was polar ice and they stood there in the dark, pale and trembling, sensing the argument to come. Hoping for it, for its heat to bring them back to life.

'You look as though you won't be able to stand for much longer.'

'Then I'll fall.'

He would. It felt so easy to die to prove a point.

'And then? In the floor, what will you have accomplished?' Hannibal asked, tone a sham of reason. He stepped closer, the floorboards cracking under the wheelchair as Hannibal brought it forward.

So fucking perfect, so infinitely enticing, inches from Will's knees - he could sink in it, and how would that be losing if it'd feel so good?

'It'll piss you off,' he mumbled; and his gaze was locked on the wheelchair, and he really did feel like a child.

'I assure you, there are much better ways to manage that,' Hannibal countered, a millisecond of amusement skittering through his eyes, 'Sit, Will, please.'

And Will sat.

Because he was a weak man; because people got shot - constantly, in Will's world - and moved on, but Will didn't. Will sat in a wheelchair, helped by the man who'd hurt him.

He thought, as Hannibal wheeled him back to his room, that they'd make an exquisite painting. In oils, in a large canvas: in dark, opulent tones, illustrious and imposing, would be Hannibal; colder, faded, degrading into monochrome, blurring into the wheelchair's metallics, would be Will. From Hannibal's forehead would sprout two horns, and everyone in this infernal museum would find him the picture of grandeur. Will, in all senses human, in all senses real, bereft of fiction and myth, so much more concrete, would seem very much like a cadaver.

When they entered Will's room, a questioning hum was Hannibal's only reaction to the shattered glass on the floor. The window was still open, the curtains swelling and curving with the fragrant breeze.

Hannibal stopped the wheelchair by the end of the bed and placed a hand gently on Will's shoulder, as if to help him rise to the mattress, but Will shook it off and did it himself in a haphazard sequence of slow efforts. As soon as he was sitting safely in bed, he shifted to the other side, far from Hannibal, and planted his eyes on the wall in front of him.

'You can go now. I'm fine.'

'You're a terrible liar, Will,' Hannibal said in a soft tone, and Will thought he might be smiling. He could see, from the corner of his eye, that he was standing still with that same tentativeness from earlier, when Will had found him waiting for him outside the bathroom. It was the hesitant hope with which one approaches a sore memory; the kind of bashfully blooming bud that waits for a very simple and silent reconciliation.

Will snorted, still staring at the white wall.

'And still I've fooled you so often,' he mused. He had, hadn't he? He'd lied to Hannibal so often; spun pretense and evaded, omitted, embellished. He'd lied. Hannibal had drinken every word.

There was a rustling, a small crackle from the floorboards as Hannibal shifted his weight. A pause, then a sigh, a dejected voice.

'Truthfully, Will, I do not see where this hostility is coming from.'

Will actually laughed. He thought he wouldn't - he thought he *couldn't* - but the dispirited sincerity in Hannibal's tone made it so preposterous that a short breath of laughter escaped him, and he couldn't help turning to face Hannibal, to take in his slightly undignified solemnity.

'You had me fucking *shot*, Hannibal.'

Hannibal's lips pressed into a thin line.

'I recall doing that only after you stabbed me, Will.'

'I-,' Will didn't even know what to say; didn't even know what sentence in the entire world could bring sense to them, and fit in any context as reasonable, and make of their insanity something akin to an actual argument. But they spoke of violence - Will looked at his thigh, at the gauze wrapped round the aching muscle, and he could still see the blood - and there were no words to fix it. There was no forgiveness - why lose time with apologies?, 'Why do you *think* I stabbed you, Hannibal? Do you think I wanted to end up here again? Can't you see that I would have given everything, that I would have given your *life*, just to leave?'

He was panting at the end of it. He was *angry*. And Hannibal, as if living for these mindless contradictions, for this instability, this incoherence, seemed calm. Like Will hadn't screamed at him, like they hadn't both sensed, as the air in the hallway turned cold, the fight bound to come.

'Did you want to stab me?' was his only question, simple and with genuine curiosity in his eyes.

Did it make a difference? Will couldn't see how it did. Intentional or not, the beginning was irrelevant. He'd let the blade slice through him, after that. They both knew it, and it said everything.

And there was something else.

Something he hadn't thought of yet.

Something that came now, so unbearable in its gentless, in its heartache, and that remembered what had come before. That remembered leaving the truck, and glancing - with the melancholy of past things - at his bedroom's window, and kneeling down to hug Winston.

And turning, and that hand on his neck, and the needle, and *then* the blade.

And the anger faded. In its place bloomed something much more hopeless. Something akin to defeat.

'You promised,' he whispered; the words sounded hollow, 'You said you'd let me leave.'

'Have I not told you once that to leave you would be suicidal?' Hannibal answered, sad smile in place. He moved the wheelchair gingerly aside, sitting on the edge of the bed. Will didn't say anything in response, lost in his mind, replaying the sound the knife had made as it ripped through skin - millions of replicas in unison, echoing, a chorus of death.

'I had to do it, Hannibal. You left me no choice.'

'I know, my dear,' Hannibal didn't look mad; he looked *understanding*, and he lifted one hand to softly cup Will's cheek, 'You looked wonderful as you did it.'

'Does it hurt?'

He hoped it did.

'It was agony, in the moment. But then Chiyoh returned you to me, and I saw the state in which you were, and everything else seemed dull. It has not hurt since. There are worse pains, I think, to distract myself with.'

Will didn't answer. He looked down, at the gap between the sides of Hannibal's robe, where only a peek of white fabric was visible against his skin.

It had seemed like the worst wound, when he'd done it. He'd felt like a murderer. And now, with Hannibal lovingly cradling his face, just like Will had held Hannibal's as he laid bleeding in the sand, he wondered if the pain Hannibal had felt then and the pain Will was feeling now, reverberating in harrowed cries inside his skull, had felt precisely the same.

'Do you know that you smell like her?' Hannibal murmured in the tone of a lullaby, his face close to Will's, his nose inches from his cheek, 'Chiyoh has touched you too often, I believe.'

Will smiled weakly.

'I bet you're dying to rectify that.'

'May I?' Hannibal asked - pleaded, through the low cadence in his tone. After a compass of pause in which Will was quiet, he closed the gap between them to press a slow, chaste kiss to Will's cheek.

'Hannibal,' Will breathed, 'No. We have to talk.'

'What else about, love?' came absent words spoken to Will's neck, where Hannibal was pressing another kiss.

'I don't want to *be* here.'

Because it always came down to that; because all of this - *everything* - had always been about that. And they danced around it, and drew tangents to old conflicts and new arguments, but it was horribly simple in the end.

Will wanted to leave.

'You must rest until your leg is healed. There is no need to worry about leaving until then.'

Hannibal placed one hand on Will's bare chest, the skin warm against his, and gently nudged Will down, inviting him to lay down on the bed. Will resisted and, with teeth clenched, he shifted away from Hannibal.

'It doesn't work like that.'

'It could,' Hannibal offered, reaching out to thumb absently at the skin of Will's thigh now, 'Why not, Will? Why worry now, when there is nothing you can do? Why not relax, and rest, and let me take care of you?'

Lips were on him again, skittering sweetly across his forehead. It was too tender; it felt too nice, and Will could fall asleep like that, with Hannibal lulling him to sleep.

'We'll lay down, yes? We'll rest now, sweetheart.'

He wanted it. He wanted the concept in those words. And it made Will terrified, because agreeing with Hannibal was never *right* - could never be, and he had to stop it, to end it, to make sure there was still anger.

So he shifted away once more, and he searched wildly for Hannibal's gaze, for those blown pupils and the pure love around them, and he said:

'I kissed Linette, at the party.'

It was very evident that it had worked.

And it was very evident that it was an unforgivable mistake.

Because Will thought: 'he'll kill her for this'.

And here was his selfishness, here was the darkness that had always stopped him, deep down, from feeling like a victim; for in that instant, seeing the hurt flash through Hannibal's eyes, he couldn't find it in himself to care.

'You kissed Linette.'

'That's what I said.'

'You're a terrible liar.'

'And still I've fooled you so often,' he murmured once more, 'Am I lying now, Hannibal?'

Hannibal's eyes were wide, his face tense, trying to remain composed, but his words wavered when he spoke:

'I've done nothing but love you.'

'You had me shot.'

'To *keep* you.'

'I'm not yours.'

Hannibal's mouth set very straight. Will thought he might die; thought he might kill him.

Instead, in one swift, graceful movement, he stood off the bed and left without uttering a word.

Left Will in his bed, in the dark, feeling the saliva dry off his skin.

Absently, Will slid down until he was fully laying in the bed, eyes mimicking shadows in the ceiling. He wondered if he'd ever fall asleep again.

He wondered if this was the moment people gave up. It felt right. Hope was for fortunate ones who hadn't failed yet - how could he hope? How could he, Will Graham, dare to hope under that cursed name? He'd run; he was back. He'd met Linette: he'd killed her now. He'd left Hannibal to die: he'd lived.

He'd failed.

He kept failing.

It seemed alright to give up. It seemed *easy*.

Dan. The man at the academy, Will's friend, his name was Dan.

Maybe he would have made it farther. Will was
done.

The next morning, Chiyoh cleaned and dressed his wound. Never did she speak a word; never did Will look at her work.

She cleaned the glass pieces off the floor.

Later, she wheeled him to the bathroom.

The entire time, Hannibal was absent. Not even a shift from an adjacent room; a stream of light behind a door. When he glanced down the stairs in the hallway, the first floor was dark and dead.

How funny would it be if Hannibal had left. He could be in France by now, sitting with a view to the river Seine. He could live there for the rest of his life - or move as he deemed fit, maybe back to America some time - while Will rotted in this little house, in this little bank of sand, confined to his little bedroom til he went mad.

Maybe he'd already said the last words he'd ever say to Hannibal. The other night, reckless and simplistic. Hurtful. And it would be the last thing between them, hovering an eternal string to bind them in memory - and time wouldn't soften it, and distance wouldn't blur it, and Hannibal in his brightly french nights and Will in his exile would hurt just the same.

Then again, if Will forced himself to ban all poetics from his mind - if he pinched the bridge of his nose just so, a little sting of nail in skin to bring him back, for an idle moment, into a world of *existence*, he could find much more obvious motivations behind Hannibal's disappearing act.

He could be sulking, lost in the darkness downstairs, or even in his own bed, perhaps accompanied by some tempestuously tempered opera.

He could be killing Linette.

Oh, Linette.

He'd been terrifyingly cruel. To Hannibal - which didn't matter much. To Linette - unspeakably so.

As ruthless as slicing her throat open himself; much eviller, however, for he controlled the knife through another's hand.

But it had been *irresistible*. Will had so often felt cast out by the universe; wasn't it fair then to assume that the universe as an entity existed, and that it would understand - just this once -

that it couldn't have been helped? That Will had every right to hurt Hannibal for bringing him back, for dragging him back up those stairs after he'd *won*? They'd been ill-thought words designed to hurt, that was all. They didn't need to have consequences. Hannibal was enraged, yes, but that didn't mean he'd kill Linette. They were supposed to be laying low, after all.

It didn't have to mean anything. Hannibal would leave him alone for a while, and Linette would be fine. One brief sentence spoken impulsively in some utterly insignificant moment could not be responsible for death. It was a stutter, a ripple time would smooth.

It didn't matter.

It was fine.

And existence faded away. It didn't matter. Will sunk back into the bed, and weaved limericks in his mind, and dozed off, and woke back into a world tinged with indistinct yellow, and obsessed, and thought of absolutely nothing, and wondered how strange it was that he didn't feel any different from when he'd been unconscious.

The sun was hanging high when the door to his bedroom opened again.

This time, it was Hannibal.

He came in wheeling a little cart with a silver tray over it: a few small bottles, a glass of water, a large bowl. He was wearing that robe again, but its lines were set anew - like he'd ironed it directly into his skin.

His hair was done too. Combed all neat and proper, shining liquid like the robe's silk.

It reminded Will of his old suits.

He knew now, with muscle memory instinct, that he should be running.

'Good morning, Will,' he said pleasantly, stopping a few steps from the bed. He let go of the little cart and placed his hands behind his back.

Will was scared. For one moment - for a second - Hannibal was the surgeon he'd once been, and Will was about to be sliced open.

'Morning,' he said cautiously. The bedsheets were pooled over his waist, and he wished he had a shirt he could put on.

'I've taken the liberty of preparing you some food,' a gentle nod at the silver tray, the pleasant tone still in perfect place, warm in eyes, 'Something light, not to upset your stomach.'

'You brought me food?' Will repeated, surprised.

'Indeed,' Hannibal smiled; he seemed thoughtful then, a little hesitant, flicking an imaginary fleck of dust from his forearm before continuing, 'I am aware that I left somewhat abruptly yesterday night. It was impolite of me. I apologize.'

Will could barely believe it. Hannibal, repentant before him over something which was so obviously - so undoubtedly, in Hannibal's mind - Will's fault.

It was a plan. It was a plan, because Hannibal was always conveniently in the position of person wronged, unless it fitted him to do some right.

It was a plan, so Will nodded vaguely, and didn't bite.

'I think it's important,' Hannibal went on, 'that we do not argue, Will. I know that you are upset with me, and I know that you have not yet seen the beauty in this place. I assure you that I know. However, I think it's clear that you will not be able to do much to rectify your situation in the recent future; it would be in your best interest, as I see it, if you found a way to coexist with me. Peacefully, Will.'

'You know, I've studied this type of thing, Hannibal,' Will sighed, 'You do it better than others, but it's not an original - nor subtle - technique. You want me to accept it.'

'Not accept. Postpone.'

Will snorted, 'As a psychiatrist, how often did you advise your patients to postpone problems?'

'I'm not pretending this is only in *your* best interests, Will,' Hannibal smirked, amused, 'You know I wish for nothing more than a life with you beside me. I've told you countless times,' his eyes let in a bit of fondness; he stepped closer to the bed, 'But it isn't purely selfish. You deserve rest, Will. We were friends once, surely we can be friends again.'

The room felt unbearably light all of the sudden. The open window - the blinding blue outside -, the little dresser, the wooden boards, the wheelchair by the foot of the bed: it all felt featherlight, laden with possibility.

He *had* been friends with Hannibal once. He remembered very distinctly: sitting in his dining room, eating his food, smiling as Hannibal squeezed his shoulder. Drinking whiskey by the fireplace, knowing he planned to betray him, and yet, glimpsing at Hannibal's calm, satisfied figure as he sat beside him, feeling the most paradoxical sense of loyalty - and knowing he owed this man something intangible, something beyond anything that might ever happen.

He'd felt like he owed him his soul.

He'd felt it because, when Hannibal looked at him - when he cooked for him, refilled his glass without a word, smiled so warmly when he wandered into his office, when he'd *squeezed* his shoulder - he knew he had, in turn, Hannibal's heart.

'You can't be friends with me, Hannibal.'

'Whyever not?'

'You love me.'

Hannibal cocked his head, the perfect picture of innocent confusion.

'I don't see how that would be an obstacle.'

Will scoffed; really, it was like Hannibal did it on purpose: goaded Will into hurting him.

'Hannibal, you kissed me last night. And you were murderous when I told you I kissed Linette. Were I to kiss her again, would you be happy for me, as my friend?'

Some infinitesimal muscle below Hannibal's eye twitched.

'I would say I have a right to be concerned as to whom my friends fraternize with.'

Will rolled his eyes, 'You didn't bring me here to be my friend. I know what you're doing, Hannibal. You can't bring up the temperature one degree at a time and expect me to burn.'

Hannibal sighed - and how could he deem to find himself in a position to sigh, when Will was entirely the one in the right? The one sensible, the one remembering all he'd ever known of Hannibal. He ran his hands once down his sides, smoothing his robe, and came to sit beside Will. He raised his hand, seemed to hesitate for a second, then placed it gently over one of Will's.

'Could you not believe me if I told you I brought you here simply not to lose you? I cannot help wishing for more, but I would be elated until my final day if I had your friendship.'

He seemed honest. His eyes seemed searching; his hand warm and tender where it covered Will's fingers. It seemed true.

Will wouldn't say he believed it.

Because he knew Hannibal, and he knew himself, and he knew them together. He knew the *circumstances*. And it all felt so unquestionably unique, but it was nothing but egotistical delusion: narrator of his own life, Will found it immensely original, but he'd learnt things, he'd studied it, and Will wasn't alone, Hannibal wasn't new, and their relationship wasn't novel. There were books featuring different copies of them in every page.

They weren't special. Hannibal didn't love him any more than all those people had loved all those other people they'd killed. Hannibal's counterparts were now in a cell somewhere; Will's were underground.

So he didn't believe it.

But it didn't seem *wrong* to say yes. It didn't seem wrong to smile politely and tap Hannibal's hand and vow for some kind of impromptu friendship: Hannibal would leave so sure that he'd make it blossom into more with time, and Will would have the comfort of some kind of companionship.

He remembered the night Hannibal had first kissed him. He remembered being tied to the bed, Hannibal's fingers trying to reach inside him. He remembered thinking that he should relax, and hating the fact that his own best interests coincided with Hannibal's. It felt like that now; like he was tempted to be *hurt* simply to defy.

But that was impulse. That was the child inside him: the one that wanted to scream when it was angry, and cry when it was sad. Will was better than that. Will could lie.

'Okay, Hannibal. Let's be friends. Let's be friends until my fucking leg heals, and then we'll discuss this again.'

The glowing smile in Hannibal's face made it all seem a little easier. He really did seem content with the idea - and Will didn't know exactly what their definition of friendship would entail, but it certainly could not be bloodier than everything else they'd been.

'I'm very glad you say so, Will. Truly,' he said, squeezing Will's hand once before releasing it, and reaching for the cart that had been left forgotten by the bed, 'Now, I think it's time you have something to eat, don't you?'

He took the bowl from the silver tray. Will glimpsed at the bowl, a fleeting smirk tugging on his lips.

'More chicken soup?'

'A variation of it, yes,' Hannibal matched his smile.

Will shifted so he was fully sitting against the headboard, and stretched a hand toward the bowl. Hannibal moved it slightly out of reach.

'I was thinking that I could perhaps feed you.'

Will couldn't help a little disbelieving chuckle from escaping him.

'Hannibal, you can't be serious.'

The man was truly impressive in how insulted he seemed over the most insignificant of things.

'It isn't an unreasonable request. I enjoy taking care of you, independently of whether I do it as a friend or as a lover.'

'Hannibal, you're not feeding me. Just give me the bowl,' Will snapped. Hannibal only inched it farther away, drawing a slow, teasing smirk.

'Is the problem that you consider feeding a necessarily sexual act? Do you not believe it can be strictly platonic?'

'Not coming from you,' Will retorted with a dry glance. He really did wish he had a shirt on.

'Don't be childish, Will,' Hannibal insisted, plunging the spoon into the soup and holding it to Will's lips with expectant eyes.

It was, for one brief instant where pride reigned free, mortifying.

But maybe Hannibal was right. Maybe it could be seen as platonic - even if Hannibal was suppressing his own intentions, Will could pretend it didn't bother him.

Eat, make Hannibal happy so that he'd leave.

Doze off til sundown. So lonely, so tired he'd feel comatose.

Will accepted the spoonful into his mouth, pointedly ignoring Hannibal's pleased smile. And then, because he could be the pamphlet cover of politeness, if only Hannibal tested him, he said:

'It's excellent. Thank you.'

Hannibal's smile grew even wider.

'It is entirely my pleasure to cook for you, Will.'

He brought the spoon back to Will's lips, and Will swallowed more of the warm, creamy soup. It was complex to a degree no chicken soup had any real right to be; it tasted well, of course, in that condescending way so typical of Hannibal's work - the flavours melded perfectly together, but Will couldn't pinpoint the ingredients, couldn't grasp the depths of what he was eating. There were tender strands of chicken, something refreshingly spicy, and everything else was lost.

'The little plant on the dresser,' Will said, once the silence had become too uncomfortable, and the little hums Hannibal was making every time Will accepted a spoonful were starting to make him flush, 'What happened to it?'

Hannibal sent a flittering look at the bare surface of the dresser, 'We moved it away. It was a convenient place for medical supplies, when we were tending to your leg,' his head tilted curiously, 'Would you like it back?'

Will shrugged.

'I liked it.'

'Then I shall endeavour to retrieve it,' Hannibal said fondly, gathering more soup in the spoon. And it was a strange thing, the dull feeling that brought him - an illegitimate guilt, a blind sort of anger berating him, for here he was, tamed in domesticity, *friends* with his captor, asking over plants, mulling over things as insignificant as the absence of those flaccid little branches which would tremble peacefully with the breeze. Here he was against his will, trapped, grateful that Hannibal would deem to find that ridiculous fucking plant.

'I'm not hungry anymore.'

'Nonsense, Will. Have some more,' Hannibal countered, tapping the spoon against his bottom lip lightly, coaxing him to accept it. Will tried to insist, but as soon as his lips parted the cold metal was insinuated between them, leaving him no choice but to swallow quietly.

'Honestly, I'm full,' Will tried once Hannibal was back to scooping up more soup, 'I think my stomach shrunk while I was unconscious.'

Hannibal arched one silver eyebrow, then placed the spoon inside the bowl and, with his now free hand, gently pulled down the sheets covering Will, exposing his stomach and placing a hand over the skin.
'Does this hurt?' he asked, looking at Will intently as he pressed down.

Will writhed a little, uncomfortable, then promptly stopped when he noticed how Hannibal's eyes had darkened. Will cleared his throat instead, holding onto the edge of the cover, which was now down enough to reveal the waistband of his boxers. Hannibal, seeming to catch himself in his own growing arousal, smoothly retreated his hand.

'Not really.'

'You're not quite full, then,' Hannibal declared with a satisfied grin; and then, swiftly, almost in anticipated guilt, he brought his hand back down to grasp Will's hip, squeezing it once, 'You'll eat a bit more for me, yes?'

'Fuck off, Hannibal.'

'You must eat, Will. You're quite weak. I really cannot leave until I've made sure you've eaten an appropriate amount.'

Taking in Hannibal's clear resolve, Will sighed.

'Sure, fine, I can do that.'

Because it wasn't that bad. It was weird, but it wasn't terrible. Will had endured much worse situations.

He diligently swallowed the next couple of spoonfuls, doing his best to tune out the situation. It wasn't too uncomfortable - the swollen, heavy feeling that weighs down one's mind when one eats too much, when the poetry of flavours fades into the background and all that's left is the crude, disenchanting and completely physical act of eating. The bowl seemed just over half empty; he suspected, with growing panic, that Hannibal was going to make him finish it.

'Is it quite as bad as you thought?' Hannibal asked mildly, clearly focused on the task at hand.

'What do you mean?'

'Me feeding you. Does it elicit the sexual connotations you so clearly feared?'

Will huffed; he'd opened his mouth to answer when Hannibal took the opportunity to force another spoonful between his lips - there was a hopelessly awkward moment where Will caught Hannibal's intent gaze as he withdrew the spoon from his mouth, but Will ignored it in favour of finally answering:

You're the one making it sexual.'

'Oh?' Hannibal raised his eyebrows, failing to hide his amusement.

'Fuck you, you know you're doing it. It's the way you look at me.'

'And how do I look at you, Will?' Hannibal prodded; Will tried again to speak, and Hannibal again interrupted him, feeding him another spoonful 'Here, swallow, Will. Good, perfect. You can answer me now.'

Will couldn't help but flush, embarrassment and anger brimming red under his skin.

'There's no point in answering you if you're going to play dense the entire time, Hannibal.'

Hannibal smirked, seeming incredibly unperturbed.

'Stay quiet, then.'

And it felt like such a casual chastisement; the most fluid order, spoken so naturally like Will was well trained and so eager to obey, that Will couldn't help blushing even darker, incapable of finding anything to say.

Fortunately, Hannibal seemed to take pity on him after a painfully long moment of silently feeding him, and filled the silence himself:

'Winston has been impatient to see you. I let him in once, so he knew you were alright, but I didn't allow him over the threshold. I feared his excited manners would cause some kind of incident. You looked so very fragile, Will, an angel in your sleep. I would sit by your side and sometimes read to you, until Chiyoh suggested that perhaps, if you could indeed hear my voice out here, it would only serve as further incentive not to wake,' Hannibal's gaze fell on him expectantly, 'I wonder, was that why it took you so long to wake up? Did you hear me?'

'I didn't hear you,' Will confessed, then looked around the room, at all he'd thought he'd never see again; and he could still see the blood puddled amongst sand; Hannibal's skin paling in front of him, 'But she was right. I wouldn't have woken, if I had. I thought I'd killed you, Hannibal. I thought you were in hell.'

'Would you not have joined me there?'

'I'd like to think I could still get a spot in heaven,' Will retorted with a small chuckle; evading, avoiding, trying to banish the droplets of blood creeping down the walls, embedding in the linen; trying not to think of death, now that they'd so nearly escaped it - for maybe, if he ignored it, if he didn't *call* it, then it wouldn't know of the mistake it had committed, it would not come to reap them both.

Hannibal was silent with an expectant seriousness for a while longer, to which Will decisively did not cave.

'Here, have some more,' Hannibal brought the spoon to Will's lips again, and the matter was archived out of sight, somewhere with soot and dark.

Will obliged for a few more spoonfuls before tapping at Hannibal's wrist, halting his movement.

'I really am full, Hannibal.'

Hannibal's eyebrows rose.

'There's still a little more to go, Will. Surely you can do it.'

Will eyed the bowl: there was still a considerable amount, and Will could already feel his stomach complaining at each bite, an unpleasant weight hot and smothering inside him.

'I don't want to.'

And Hannibal was disapproving, and it was so *stupid* - it was food, it was *meaningless*, why did they have to fight over it?

'You'll finish the bowl, Will,' he insisted, placing that damn spoon back against his lip. He huffed when Will kept his mouth firmly closed, 'I made this especially for you, it would satisfy me greatly to see you finish it. Please.'

In response, Will only leaned against the headboard, distancing himself from the raised spoon, and met Hannibal's gaze with defiance.

After all, if they were *friends* then there was no reason to obey.

It was very evident, the moment the stag unfurled; it was very evident, and ridiculously predictable, and now, in retrospective, Will was painfully aware of the stupidity in his stubbornness - for there was one hesitant second where Hannibal quietly placed the bowl and spoon back on the trolley, a second where Will wondered, surprised, if his fit had truly led to victory, and then he noticed the new, grave lines on Hannibal's face, framing him lean and dark, and he watched in absolute, underwhelming disinterest - because he *knew* it would happen, he *knew* it - as in Hannibal's forehead grew black marble spirals, and a hand circled snug around his throat.

'Why must you be so difficult?'

The fingers were only barely pressing: a warning, a chastisement. Still, it made it hard to talk; Will could feel his throat urging against the pressure there, and the entire embarrassment of the situation caught up to him - the unwitting feeding, the uncomfortable fullness of his stomach that made him flushed and heavy and way too warm, and now that casual, entitled scolding.

'I just - fuck - I'm full, Hannibal.'

Hannibal's lip twitched in amusement - and really, Will couldn't see any humour in the situation - and his other hand came to rest atop Will's stomach again, lightly petting the skin before pushing down.

'Does it hurt now?' he asked, voice pitched lower, and he had an indecent look of hunger.

Will hissed, shifting between the two offending touches, 'Yes.'

'I don't believe you,' Hannibal's fingers closed tighter around Will's throat, and still his eyes were twinkling with a sort of fond reproval, like the situation was entirely lighthearted, like Will was not struggling to breathe, 'I'll know when you're full, sweetheart.'

Will glared. He was doing his best to seem unaffected, since he knew trying to escape was fuel to Hannibal's primitive predilections, but the urge was there nonetheless.

'Is this that caretaker bullshit again?' he ground out, swallowing painfully as Hannibal's grip went punishingly tighter; and he expected the comment to hurt, to anger, but instead Hannibal only smiled.

'Yes, it is. I want you to be a good boy for me and eat what I give you. Can you do that, Will?'

Will wanted to scream, but all that came out was a choked sound - and his hands came to cling to Hannibal's arm, and he remembered the night before, when he'd sat helpless on the floor amidst broken glass.

He was just as weak, only now brightened by sunlight.

He nodded, refusing to look at Hannibal. At once, his airflow was restored.

'There we go,' Hannibal preened, picking up the bowl again, 'That wasn't so hard, was it?'

Will grimaced as he carefully prodded the tender flesh of his neck.

'The choking was uncalled for, Hannibal.'

'I assure you I did not have any intent to harm you. A grip light enough that it could be pleasurable, in other circumstances perhaps,' Hannibal smirked, gaze raking over the dotted flush across Will's chest, 'Now eat.'

Will shook his head, glaring at Hannibal, 'What the fuck was that?'

Hannibal was quiet for a second; when he spoke, his words were measured, picked out carefully.

'I wanted to make sure you ate.'

'No. That thing you do, the- the praising thing, it has to stop.'

'Does it?' Hannibal seemed very calm, and Will wanted to kill him for it, 'It is something that pleases me greatly, and I know you enjoy behaving for me, Will. Why must it go?'

'Because you're wrong, Hannibal. I don't fucking like it. So just respect that and quit it.'

Hannibal's lips clipped tight. He placed the bowl back on the little silver tray, then turned to face Will, locking eyes with him. His pupils were frightfully blown.

'You don't like it? You mean to tell me you don't blush every time I tell you what a good boy you are? You're always so wild, Will, but when I call you that you turn to putty for me.'

'You're fucking reaching.'

Hannibal arched an eyebrow; he lowered himself just a little, so that his body curved so prominent over Will's, an inescapable force in his field of sight.

'Do you want to eat the rest?'

'No.'

'Say please, then.'

Will shot him an unimpressed look, smoothing his voice into something mechanically bland, 'Please, Hannibal.'

A little blink of amusement threaded through Hannibal's eyes. 'You could do much better than that, Will. I've heard it,' he said, managing to pull a small flush from Will, before reaching for the bowl again, 'A few more bites, then, and we'll be done.'

Will pointedly shifted away from him, the movements stinging in his leg.

'Is this just an extremely strange way to punish me for the other night?'

'Now, Will, why would you need punishment?' Hannibal asked, but there was a little bitterness in his tone that made the words insincere.

Will resisted the urge to roll his eyes - he wasn't going to dignify him with a reply; if he intended to pretend Will's words hadn't upset him, then Will would happily cater to him. Let Hannibal dance around unpleasant truths - ever since they'd met that's all they'd ever done.

'Just forget it. I suppose you're going to feed me the rest of it?'

'You suppose correctly,' Hannibal nodded with a smile, scooping some more soup and bringing it to Will's lips.

As Will forced himself to swallow each spoonful, he felt not only the discomfort of his body but a childish defiance that wanted to press on, that didn't matter if it was choked or punched or kicked, since even that was less degrading than this. Because Hannibal did not seem smug - he seemed humbly content, feeding Will -, and he stubbornly refused to admit it, but this had to be revenge for Will's words the other night.

Insults paid with humiliation. So small, compared to all else they'd done.

And how was it that it all began to blend? Will had stabbed Hannibal; he'd been shot in turn; but they fought also with bickering and pettiness, and it all blurred, and it all seemed the same - sharp words cut just as deep as knives, and Will had tried them both.

'That's it, Will, just a little more,' Hannibal was cooing. Will looked at the bowl. Only three more times - maybe four, if Hannibal planned to scrape the bowl.

'It hurts when I swallow,' he complained half-heartedly.

'I know, darling,' he assured in the saccharine tone one uses on children - like Will was whining over irrelevancies, needing to be soothed, 'You're nearly done.'

The last spoonfuls were terrible; dull, flavourless, trudging slow and heavy down his esophagus. He wanted to purge it all out; to return to the weightless, inhuman state he'd felt when he'd first woken the day before.

When Hannibal placed the empty bowl back on the trolley, the clinking of ceramic and steel sounded like victory cheers. Tension culminated in his body like the snapping of elastic, then eased, disappeared, and Will melted.

'Are you happy now?'

Will said it bitterly; Hannibal was unbothered.

'You did wonderfully, my dear,' his smile was obnoxiously proud. He leaned down once more, though the movement was somewhat stunted, 'Now it hurts, does it not?' he asked, pressing insistently on Will's stomach

'Hannibal, it hurt *before*.'

Hannibal only chuckled, 'You could not eat another bite, could you?'

'Don't even *try*'

And Hannibal really didn't seem intent on fetching him more food; instead, he was silent for a moment, eyes locked in the place where his hand still pressed into Will's stomach. Slowly, he slid it down, burning a suggestive path toward his navel.

'We could find other ways to make you feel full, now, couldn't we?'

It was insane. It was ridiculous.

Will pressed himself flat against the headboard, far from Hannibal, and looked at him with widened eyes.

'You're crazy.'

'I assure you I am not,' and Hannibal was moving, shifting, imposing his weight flat over Will's - compressing him against the mattress in a smothering flexing of muscles, so that Will could imagine in his torso, under the thin layer of gauze, rivers of warm, red blood pumping rhythmically against tender, freshly sewn skin.

'What about all that shit you said about friendship? What the fuck was that?' Will snapped, because he hadn't believed it, he hadn't, but he'd *wanted* to.

'Do you truly want to be only friends, my dear?' Hannibal asked in return, his face pressed into Will's neck, mouthing at the sensitive spot under his ear. His body was nestled between Will's legs, and it was so close to his leg. So close, so unpredictable, and Hannibal was moving *carelessly*, and it was tender, maybe, in some shadowed corner, but Will could see only violence.

'Hannibal, get off me,' Will's fingers were tangled in the smooth silk of Hannibal's robe, his ribs rising to meet Hannibal's, his breath trailing unbidden into foreign lips; and when he tried to move his leg away a touch followed, a light grazing over his bandage, resting, a reminder of the hole there where led had shot through flesh - and Hannibal pressed, vicious, and swallowed the pained sound out of Will's mouth.

'How I've missed your taste, my love,' Hannibal cooed, and Will could barely see the room anymore - his entire vision was filled by Hannibal's shoulders, by the thread of silvering hair brushing his forehead, by the taunting of lips on his skin, crude in its entitlement, by the sheer realization that he was back in that room, lost in that bed, helpless again.

Like nothing had happened.

But it had. Will could swear it had, when he closed his eyes: they'd both died.

'You shot me.'

Hannibal nodded; his eyes met Will's for a slow moment of clarity, and in them shone only love, only the complicity of some glorious secret between them.

'You gutted me.'

The words felt so sweet that Will thought not of the reddened sand. Instead, he thought of the night when he'd ran, the night he'd sat on Hannibal's lap in the living room and kissed him a new first time, the night Hannibal had stared up at him, a humble priest seeing a beam of sunlight bleed precisely into Christ's heart, in the statue of the parish, and he'd known no one had ever felt more powerful. Not war generals; not mad kings not rising revolutionists; not newlyweds nor adulterers; not God, not the Devil, for the one beast capable of enforcing hell on Earth was fit snug in Will's palm. Was he truly a victim, if he'd allowed it all? If he'd guided Hannibal with subtle words, if he'd showed him the mirrors in his mind, so aware of the allure of their reflection? Could he drown in his own flood? Was this not him now, alive, breathing underwater?

It wasn't a flood at all. It was high tide, he was sitting by the pier.

He felt a little bit like he'd returned to that shrunken place in his skull.

Small, in the wispy tone one uses when they know they won't be heard, he said:

'We'll pull stitches.'

'We'll have to move slowly, then,' was Hannibal's response, light and amused.

'I don't want to move slowly,' Will retorted, sinking a nail ruthlessly into Hannibal's neck when he felt a kiss pressed on his collarbone. There was a trailing of saliva from the tip of his ear to his chest, drying in the cold air.

Hannibal had the audacity to chuckle.

'We'll move *very* slowly, sweetheart,' he said, eyes twinkling with indulgent fondness, and Will could not phantom how he moved so elegantly, shifting down the bed to wrap his lips around one of his nipples with that gash so unapologetic in his middle, peeking from between the edges of his robe, 'You'll tell me if anything hurts, yes?'

'Like you'll listen to me.'

'I'll listen to you if I believe you're being truthful,' Hannibal smirked, sliding the tip of his tongue toward Will's other nipple and giving it a playful bite. Will gritted his teeth to smother a moan and tried to shift up on the bed, but Hannibal was quick to still his movements, 'Easy, darling.'

*'No.'*

And Hannibal didn't listen, he never listened, and he slotted their crotches together tortuously close, grinding down in a purposeful place - and, though Will's underwear and Hannibal's robe were dividing skin and skin, the contact was still flickering in his mind, and the hardness he found thrusting against him was making him harden in turn, and Will was impossibly tired of it, so he fisted his hands in Hannibal's hair and *pulled*.

Hannibal' lips were slick with saliva, pressed together in a pained hiss; his face, held up by Will's hands; his eyes, dark with hunger - it was obscene, and Will's anger seemed to fade, and his voice was breathless when he spoke:

'Fucking stop, Hannibal.'

Hannibal, if anything, seemed even more enraptured. Experimentally, Will tugged on his hair again. Hannibal's eyelids fluttered in bliss.

'Sweetheart.'

'You're impossible.'

'You're irresistible,' Hannibal murmured, and Will could still feel the little absent swirls of Hannibal's hips, and the way his chest rippled against his own with every ragged breath, 'Tell me to take care of you.'

'I'm fine,' Will answered curtly - but it was difficult, with the wanton look in Hannibal's eyes; with that desperate need so obvious in his expression.

'You're *aching,*' Hannibal retorted with an accusatory thrust, before his gaze turned sharper, 'Is the problem that you'd rather someone softer? Someone slimmer?'

'I knew it was bothering you. You want to know why I kissed her, don't you?' Will asked, and he could see the answer in his expression - in the anger flashing across his eyes. Hannibal tried to dip his head back into the crook of Will's neck, but Will held him firmly by his hair.

'Would I prefer Linette to you? You *abducted* me, Hannibal. You took me here. I'm in fucking *Italy* because of you. Can't you guess the answer yourself?'

And time stilled, and Will was being so heartless - and it felt incredible, this cruelty; witnessing the way Hannibal wavered from stricken to cold in a millisecond, knowing he'd cut deep once more. It felt *good,* and Will was so sure Hannibal would leave just like he'd done the night before to sulk in that dignified way of his.

But he didn't.

No.

Every muscle in his face tightened, his complexion went a frenzy of pale and blush; and his irises were entirely black, circled only by a ring of blood red, and he seemed to topple over his edge and spill out - and he kissed Will in a clash of teeth, a violent bite to his bottom lip, and Will felt like he was sinking, choking, dead.

'She doesn't deserve you,' he growled into Will's mouth, licking into it, grinding down with a strength that made the mattress crack and Will moan, 'She shouldn't be allowed to walk the same ground as you.'

'You liked her,' Will pointed out, struggling to fight off the urge to arch his back and thrust into the obscenely alluring spot where their erections met.

Hannibal huffed and attached himself to the side of Will's neck.

'I would eviscerate her in a second.'

'Yes, but you still liked her.'

'She could never please you,' Hannibal's words felt desperate, muffled against Will's skin in a mix of suction and saliva, 'She could not hold you down, give you something to writhe for. She's nothing, Will. Tell me.'

And Hannibal was still grinding down - so painfully, so persistently against Will's erection -, swept in a world of heat and buzz that Will saw nearing in unrelenting steps, and Will didn't want to *be* there; he didn't want any of it to be happening, he wanted to be alone, quiet, *dead* in his bedroom, blurry-eyed and slow-hearted, unthinking of all the shit that was happening, and an instant surge of aggression went red in his vision, and he cocked his good leg forcefully under Hannibal's weight, pressing his knee hard against his belly, pushing him off.

And he didn't think much of it.

It took him a few seconds to even register it.

Because he'd been in many fights before - ever since a teen, ever since he'd tasted the blood riveting from his first split lip - and he knew how it went: he knew when he was meant to lose, and he knew when he was about to win.

That wasn't a winning blow.

So it took him longer than it should. He was so focused on regaining his breath, he was so acutely aware of the way his injured thigh was throbbing, that it took him a moment to wonder why Hannibal had gone with nothing but a brief groan, and stayed so compliantly, beside him on the mattress as if asleep.

He remembered, then.

It wasn't this blow which had hurt. It was a ghost of the old one, the one that had bled.

'Fuck, Hannibal,' he called out, kneeling beside him, 'Are you okay?'

Hannibal shifted just the slightest bit, an unfocused gaze flickering back to Will's.

'I believe I may have pulled some stitches.'

Will gingerly pulled apart the sides of Hannibal's robe

'I'm sorry,' he murmured, watching the bandage round his torso colour a dark crimson.

'It's alright, Will.'

'Really, I didn't mean to-'

'Will, darling,' Hannibal's tone was gentle yet firm, 'It's perfectly fine. Would you please call Chiyoh for me?'

Will nodded vaguely. Staring at the ever-growing circle of blood staining the white gauze, he could think only of when Hannibal had been laying in the sand outside, body limp, shirt dark red, dying with his head cradled in Will's arms.

He wasn't sure if he could speak.

---

Will slept a lot, after that.

He slept, and he dutifully ignored the visions of blood tormenting his mind.

He had absolutely no dreams.

All blissful black.

It was when the night came that his eyes refused to shut.

He laid in bed shifting and turning until every horrible idea seemed not horrible but different. Possible. Tempting.

Then, he maneuvered himself into the wheelchair at the foot of the bed and wheeled his way out of the room, into the corridor and toward Hannibal's door.

It was just an inch open; Will pushed it gently, seeing the contours of Hannibal's bedroom take shape under the straying light from the hall. The room didn't seem much different from Will's own - a little fuller, perhaps.

Hannibal was in bed, breathing slowly, seemingly asleep.

Will neared it, the floorboards crackling so disgracefully under the wheels, and lightly tapped his shoulder. Sleeping eyes came alive with little flutters of eyelid and eyelash, and Hannibal stared at him dazedly.

'Will.'

The word was murmured; so soft, so light that Will thought perhaps he was still asleep himself, and this was finally his dream.

'Does it hurt now?' he whispered.

'Yes.'

Will bit his lip. He took in Hannibal's figure, all gentle curves and dark shades, a head peeking from the covers in a tousle of silver hair, one nude shoulder and a dip of a collarbone just slightly visible, and asked:

'Can I sleep here tonight?'

In response, Hannibal simply shifted to the side, allowing Will to climb in. Soon he felt a warm chest press against his back, a hand soothing on his waist.

'I think I don't want you to die.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' Hannibal said against the top of his head, planting a little kiss to the curls there.

'And I think you were right. I deserve some rest. A normal life.'

Hannibal hummed. Will stared very closely at the wall in front of him, trying not to think, trying not to care.

'I want to be friends, Hannibal. Just like before all of this. Friends. Nothing more.'

There was a pause - and still, Will very decidedly did not think, did not judge himself. In the end, after all, what else could have happened?

Then, Hannibal withdrew his hand from Will's waist.

'Goodnight, then, Will.'

The warmth against Will's back disappeared as Hannibal shifted away.

'Goodnight, Hannibal.'

They didn't speak another word. Will wondered if Hannibal had fallen back asleep. He wondered if he himself had, or if he was still awake. It really did all blur together, after a while.

Chapter End Notes

Bet I'll have cut my hair twice before I post chapter seven.

# Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

We're back!!

I know, less than two months, I'm officially breaking my pattern xD

Alright, so, surprisingly enough, I am not going to abuse the author notes this time and do an extraordinarily long rant. I just hope you guys can sit back, relax and enjoy the chapter~ <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘I want more books.’

‘I have a great selection of books in my study. Have you taken a look at those?’ Hannibal answered, one eyebrow quirked from where he was sitting at the dining table.

‘No, I haven’t,’ Will shrugged, ‘But I don’t want them.’

‘May I ask why?’

‘You told me I could get anything I’d like, Hannibal,’ Will reminded, smile poised in such innocent pretense he was sure would be infuriating. Still, Hannibal simply smiled back, indulgent, amused, and added another written line to the list in front of him.

‘What type of books would you like, then?’

‘Something with travelling, I think. Not to Italy, though.’

‘Anything else?’

Will looked down at Winston, who was resting on his feet, neatly curled into a ball, fur shining golden with the high noon sunlight.

‘Some decent clothes. Toys for Winston. A proper bed for him, too.’

‘That can certainly be arranged,’ another line on the little list, another approving smile. In the afternoons, after lunch, when the plates had been cleared and the wine had been refilled, Hannibal was always at his softest - he’d sit and bask in the warm light, looking ridiculously like a cat, all fond gazes and agreeable words. Will had even caught him petting Winston once. He didn’t do it particularly well - he’d approached it like one approaches a skill to be learnt, which damned the entire thing - but the sentiment had been there.

He got even more amenable whenever Will specially liked the meal.

Will had made sure to weave compliment after compliment that day.

‘I want something else,’ he was fiddling with his fingers under the table; his features were perfect calm, ‘You told me you’d buy it once.’

Hannibal raised both eyebrows this time.

‘Oh?’

‘Fishing equipment.’

A little sound: Hannibal tapping pen against paper.

‘Will. Your leg.’

His leg. His leg which had been recovering too slow to tell. So slow, in fact, that it could rightfully be considered a cosmic joke. Some kind of trickster karma latched onto him, or something equally as tragic. His leg which hurt, and hurt, and didn’t stop hurting, no matter how many days had passed, how many anguished steps he’d taken in vain efforts to regain his strength, how many hours he’d spent under Hannibal’s supervision, begrudgingly repeating the fucking pathetic exercises Hannibal showed him. His leg which was still red and atrophied, despite the soothing nonsense Hannibal fed him whenever he changed his bandages. His leg - that was something he’d stopped fucking caring about. Let it rot right off his body, Will would barely feel it.

So he shrugged.

‘What about it?’

And, because it was high noon, because the sun tingled warm in skin, because Will had said the fish was perfect, because he’d batted his eyelashes in that way that made some muscle in Hannibal’s face twitch, Hannibal did not pursue it - he didn’t unfold into his usual rant of tedious technical terms, nor the saccharine reaffirmations of ‘later’, ‘one day’.

No.

The pen slid along smooth paper. A flourish, a flick of his wrist.

Wrote it down. Smiled. The agreeable cat by the sun.

Will nodded tersely.

‘Thank you.’

‘I should have been able to procure everything by the end of the week. Are you sure you’d like nothing else?’

Will snorted. Did he want anything else? Inside the maddening confines of his prison - no, not prison, a limited freedom which only ever showed when he *pushed* - what was within possibility? What could he wish for knowing it could be obtained? Books, toys for his dog, fishing equipment: pointless artifice, pretense choices designed to lull Will into some passenger state of pride. Like he'd quiet down with a book on his lap and smile and be done with it - 'done enough', he'd think, and rest numb for the weeks to come. What else, besides that, could he want? What else could he ask for without the pending silence of something which cannot be given? Because when Hannibal posed the question in that reasonable tone of his, it seemed unbounded, hopeful, and Will could bring himself to think, for a fraction of a second, that it was within his power to ask, that it was within his abilities to *want* - and he wanted for his leg to be better, for his skin to mend; he wanted to walk without a cane; he wanted Hannibal to talk to him less, but talk to him sometimes so he didn't lose his mind, but talk to him simply and exclusively of the niche of topics that didn't remind Will of who he was talking to, and who he was, and what was happening; he wanted to sleep in his bed in Baltimore; he wanted to erase of sight and mind the night where he'd slept in Hannibal's bed - rested soundly by Hannibal's side, a traitor to himself, a brainwash ragdoll, a crying child blind in their search for comfort; he wanted to scream, and for screaming to be useful; he wanted to kill Hannibal; he wanted to burn down that stupid fucking house; he wanted Italy to sink into the ground.

'No, that's all.'

He nudged Winston off him with a foot, then limped his way out the dining area and into the living room, Winston trailing after him from a distance. Hannibal, by some blessing, remained where he was.

It was hell, choosing a place to sit now. He hated that couch where he'd laid so often before he'd escaped; he could hardly look at the armchair where he'd kissed Hannibal, staring into endlessly adoring eyes; he could not bear, in short, the concept of sitting, resting, wating. Doing nothing, for he could do nothing, and give up the mere thought of planning *anything*.

He hated it. But his leg, for all his apathy, for all his detachment, still ached, and the pain was very real, and there was only so much he could ignore before the choice was fainting or sitting.

Thus, he sat. Settled in his usual couch by the window, maneuvered Winston away from his bandaged leg, and stared at some nondescript spot on the wall.

He waited. What for, he didn't yet know.

Will had spent the first few days in a curiously catatonic state.

He'd never been quite like it, not in his worst moments.

Now, he barely remembered it. There was a little door to it in his mind, the key in a hook beside it, and Will knew beyond was a sea of grey, illusory shallow and sticky-limbed.

He never touched the key, though he often itched to feel it in his fingers, wondering how bad it could be.

The episode, he knew, had ended when Chiyoh left. It was one of his few memories. He'd been laying in his bed; Chiyoh and Hannibal standing beside it, speaking in unintelligible, unpronounceable words. Then, Chiyoh had leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. She did the same to Hannibal, cool and bland as her nature dictated, and left.

Something very heavy had settled in the air, then, as Hannibal regarded him softly. Something very heavy, and impossibly hot, like Will was swallowing smolder, pushing fire down his throat, and it weighed tons in his esophagus, and it had bubbled in this surge of white panic, and he was *alone* with Hannibal, alone in that fucking house, and suddenly he was Will Graham again.

He snapped out of it. Hannibal was worried - he could see it in his face, in the surprise he'd elicited each time he spoke - but he didn't really mention it.

Will still thought back on it, however. Pushed back to the beginning of it. He'd woken in Hannibal's bed, Hannibal still sleeping by his side. He remembered how he'd stared out into the dark, hardly blinking, hardly breathing, trying to comprehend how in hell he'd gotten there. For one millisecond of pitiful relief, he'd been convinced Hannibal had dragged him there - then, he'd remembered slipping so meekly under the sheets. He'd remembered the words he'd whispered, weak and pathetic, wishing for truce so he wouldn't have to bother fighting. He was there, it was his fault, his initiative, his fucking doing, and he'd failed, failed in whatever - in *everything* a victim ought to do. He'd waived bravery, resistance, any shred of fucking sense in his brittle head. He'd slept beside him, he'd slept beside *him*, he was fucking *ridiculous*.

It was strange. It was like his name no longer fit him. Like he'd strayed so far from Will Graham that he was no one anymore.

So, he'd acted like no one. Right up until Chiyoh left. Right up until panic, as it had brought him under, woke him up.

In any sense, he still thought about it. Specially in moments like this, when the night had set and whiskey swirled lazy in his hand, and the lights were dim, and it felt a little bit like he hadn't woken after all - he was moving, speaking, thinking, but he wasn't really alive.

'What are you thinking about, Will?' Hannibal asked, sipping on his blood red wine.

'I don't think I want to say.'

‘I was thinking whether the old concept of earth ovens could be successfully applicable to human flesh.’

Will sent him a wry glance.

‘Doesn’t it get tiring to think only of cannibalism?’

‘One does not tire of what they love,’ Hannibal smirked in that private way he reserved for Will, dizzying in its honesty, paradoxical in its vulnerability, in its threat, ‘I must say, however, that I don’t think about it often. Lately, I’ve been thinking about it less and less. Surely it would not surprise you, Will, to know the majority of my thoughts relate to you.’

Will let out a bitter laugh, took a swig of his drink.

‘The fact that they involve me doesn’t mean that they exclude cannibalism.’

Hannibal smiled over the brim of his glass.

‘No, it does not.’

It was with dark disappointment that Will found his glass empty. He was reaching for the bottle on the stand to get his third refill of the night when Hannibal spoke once more:

‘You didn’t tell me what you were thinking about.’

The night, outside, was windier than usual. The breeze snapped at the weeds, cracked at the glass panels. Will glimpsed at it, then settled further into the warmth of the couch.

‘I was thinking that I don’t feel alive.’

Hannibal nodded. He looked unperturbed, which was perhaps to be expected. Of all the topics they discussed, of all the subjects common between them, why should this be any source of discomfort? How could they ever feel awkward or reticent in each other’s company?

‘Near death experiences can have that power on people. It makes one reevaluate the life they’ve lived so far.’

‘It’s funny. Everything I reevaluate has to do with you. Meeting you, going to your office that first time… every single time I thought about stabbing you and didn’t. The one time I did.’

Hannibal was watching him with something akin to curiosity in his eyes.

‘Do you regret it?’

Will smiled - and, in an echo of himself centuries ago, he did not meet Hannibal’s gaze.

‘Not all of it. You deserved to be stabbed.’

Hannibal didn't answer. They both sipped their drinks in silence. Outside, the wind blew in high-pitched whisps.

'You will feel alive again, Will, I assure you,' he spoke at last.

Will only nodded, letting the whiskey burn down his throat. He thought best not to share that he didn't much mind being dead.

Instead, he pictured how it'd feel to be outside, where it was all plain and sand, where the breeze snapped cold and dark, and sunk lower on the couch, head propped up on a pillow.

'So, what answer did you come to? About the earth ovens, I mean.'

'I'm not sure,' was Hannibal's response, tone murmured, serene. His eyes, as they followed Will's movements, were so *fucking* in love that Will closed his own, trying to evade the weight of emotion, 'There are certain aspects to consider. Not that I intend to try it any time soon.'

Will hummed; and then, selfishly, because he wanted to rest, because he wanted an anchor not to let his mind wander into its favoured dark places, because he hated Hannibal, he *hated him*, but he loved him, and that curse had to have its upturns, he said:

'Tell me about it.'

Hannibal did. In that perfectly measured voice, woven through that accent Will knew so well, he digressed on the perverse topic - and it was that voice, which had guided Will so often before, to havens and dreams and chaos and death, that led him to sleep.

---

'This is fucking pointless.'

'It's not.'

'It fucking *is*.'

Hannibal sighed. He was crouched down in Will's bedroom, Will sitting on the bed with both his hands cradling his injured thigh.

Not cradling, not really - his touch wasn't gentle, light with the hope of nurture. He dug nails into his skin, punishing, trying not to hiss so Hannibal wouldn't know.

‘I know you’re aware of the importance of physiotherapy, Will. It’s a slow but vital process,’ and, honestly, Will *hated* that tone on Hannibal - he’d rathered him with the cool ruthless edge that spoke of bloodshed than the nice monotone of doctors. It sounded too closely to Hannibal’s voice before all of this. When he was his psychiatrist, his friend, nothing else.

‘It’s too slow, then.’

‘That does not mean it’s not effective.’

*‘Hannibal*- Jesus, would you just leave?’ Will snapped.

Hannibal looked a bit stricken - how wouldn’t he, when Will knew how much he treasured those punctual moments where Will was all vulnerable and pliant, where touch was not wanted but necessary, and Hannibal could pause his self-control to lay featherlight fingers on his skin and hush and comfort him?

Still, he was nothing if not a man of restraint. Will had said it in his access of weakness, that night in Hannibal’s bed - ‘let’s be friends’. Hannibal had, as it appeared, taken it to heart with newfound dedication. Touch friendly, words friendly; ever-present the wish for more, since that could not for an instant be swept off his face, but it wasn’t demanding, more a gentle reminder. Will didn’t know what exactly had changed: God knew he’d tried to appease Hannibal into this intermediary state ever since that first night in Baltimore. Now, however, Hannibal relented with the incessant pushing, and chose instead to flatten and compress himself, molding to Will’s whims, to his outbursts and moods and fits, prompt to agree or nod in passive sympathy.

Doing nothing, just like Will did nothing. A standstill. Waiting for the other to start anew. Waiting for time to unfreeze. For the bell to sign in the new round.

‘You must finish your exercises,’ he said with a small frown.

‘I don’t need your help for that,’ Will actually did, if only to motivate him into grinding down his teeth and *trying*, if only to remember why he needed his leg back.

Hannibal knew he needed him too. According to what was written so primly in the core of his nature, he’d relish on the fact; he’d delight in the circumstances and push Will’s discomfort til he was sufficiently entertained. As it was, his face tensed into lines of reluctance; he breathed out, nodded a little, and stood.

‘Alright. If you need assistance, you need only call.’

And he was off, no doubt to loom and loiter in tedious worry. He left the door ajar, so he could spy.

Will pushed himself off the bed, reached for his cane and limped to the door. Closed it with a thud. Leaned against it, his own barricade, and stared out the window of his room.

It’d been two weeks. Two weeks since he’d woken up after being shot. Two weeks in which he’d been dragging his leg around like some useless appendix, dispassionately glancing at it

where it pulsed in a dull, constant pain. Hating this part of his body, hating himself for everything he'd done and hadn't been able to do, hating Hannibal as one hates the notion of God - helpless and quiet.

Two weeks.

How long did that make, in total? Since he'd been whisked off of America? How long had it been since he'd last seen Alana? His dogs? How long since he'd strolled out of his house at night, watching the fog roll around it like the sea does a boat?

It became progressively more confusing, with each passing day, the entire concept of leaving. Progressively muddier, for Hannibal had stripped everything else that existed. He could go, yes, like he'd done before - perhaps this time it would work. And then, with each step straying from that house, the world would fade to flickering pixels and freezing white. There was nothing beyond this for Will. His old life had been fit inside a snug box - it had suffocated. The old Will Graham was broken-boned in a bag somewhere dark - he'd bled out. He was a very different Will now, a sorry excuse for a person with the confidence of identity of an infant, and he didn't know what he wanted, besides some faint echo from all the ghosts he'd been before: shouting for him to get away, to run, to hide in that white void.

Will let his head drop against the door. He'd studied victims for most of his life. Now, in these circumstances he'd long ago memorized, he found himself thinking precisely like one - and no amount of familiarity helped, and no previous knowledge let him avert that mindset. All he'd needed was the right captor, and Will turned into the perfect victim.

He finished his exercises lamely, distracted, one eye glued to the bright blue outside. He did wish it would rain sometimes. He wished it'd storm.

Once he'd laboured his way down the stairs, Hannibal was shrugging on a light blue suit jacket, car keys dangling from one hand.

Will had held those keys in his own hand, once. So pointless it'd been.

'I'm going into town for some groceries. I'll try to buy your books as well, dear.'

Will glared a little at the pet name: Hannibal had been careful to bottle them up inside - friendly, controlled, all saccharine behaviour suppressed -, but sometimes the sweet words still fell unbidden from his lips, unconscious and unnoted.

'Would you tell Linette I say hello?' he asked, tone all twisted nice and innocent, just the barest hint of mischievous, because if Hannibal got to hurt him, even without knowing, then Will was surely allowed to hurt back.

As expected, Hannibal's face contorted into something cold. He smoothed down the lines of his jacket.

'I doubt I'll see her.'

Will shrugged, 'If you do.'

‘Of course,’ Hannibal’s smile was the epitome of fake, no real try to perfect it, which meant Hannibal was entirely uncaring of whether or not Will sensed his displeasure.

‘Bye, then,’ Will said curtly, once he saw Hannibal was still rooted quite firmly to his spot.

‘Yes, goodbye,’ he headed towards the garage door - that door Will had locked once, listening as Hannibal threw his weight against it -, then caught himself, looking back at Will with softer eyes, ‘Please don’t overwork yourself while I’m not here.’

Will hummed for an answer, smiling internally at the little line of frustration that created in the other man’s features. ‘Don’t forget my books,’ he added, turning back and walking to the dining area, feeling Hannibal’s eyes dig holes in his back for a moment before the garage door clicked shut.

He breathed, then. A little shaky sigh, a genuine smile.

He really did love it when Hannibal went out into town. In those rare times, he was completely and utterly alone, only he and Winston in the big empty house. No door was locked - why would Hannibal bother, when Will was weak and crippled, when the mere idea of him trying to escape was laughable? - which meant he could even, if he wanted, step a bit outside, breathing in the sea-salted breeze.

‘Winston? Hey, hey, boy, wanna go play fetch?’

It was still chilly outside. It always took some time for the sunlight to warm up the cold the night had left, when it was all dark and quiet, except for the waves bellowing out far.

Will dug the cane into the sand, dragging himself into the plains, searching for some sturdy twig to use. When he found one, he let Winston sniff it for a little while, let the anticipation grow, let his eyes brighten with that simple glee so characteristically canine, so fucking enviable; and when his tail was wagging, tongue lapping at Will’s hand, Will cocked his arm and threw far, watching it disappear amidst the weeds.

Winston set out running in a flash, clouds of gold and silver sand lifting with each clumsy hop across the banks. It was peaceful there, nothing but Winston’s barks and Will’s laughter in the air.

That’s how it could have been.

He could have had no money, no connections, no friends, no home. But he would have been somewhere, had he gotten on that train. He would have had Winston with him. It wouldn’t have been much at all, but in this absence of things, in this minimalism, he could have been happy.

He really could have been.

No matter where.

And Will stared on as Winston sprinted so freely, all unbound energy, like he could go anywhere, like he needn’t a thing to keep running everlong, and he thought: there was

nothing, truly, to stop him.

Oh, Hannibal hadn't worried, hadn't locked a door, for how could he conceive, amidst the unfaltering logic of his mind, such a reckless plan? To run with a crippled leg, that'd be pure insanity.

Like Will was still expected to be rational.

But he didn't have to be. Because, once again, Will had studied victims for most of his life: yes, he'd become one, but there was a certain freedom to it. He could embrace despair. After what he'd gone through, it was his right.

'Winston! Here, boy.'

Winston neared him with the twig between his teeth, incorruptibly excited, shaking in childlike pride. Will petted his head, scratched him indulgently between the ears. Threw the twig again, far away, in the direction of the road.

Winston ran off.

This time, Will followed.

He clenched his jaw, gripped white-knucked onto his cane and worked through the unsteady terrain, the shifting sand, the patches of short weeds. Laboured slowly, the house behind him, the narrow path to his right, in the corner of his eye.

He could do it. He could walk *somewhere*. Walk to town, walk to those damn fishing huts he'd found. Maybe he'd walk to the ocean: hadn't he planned to swim back to America once? Why not commit to this madness? Perhaps some idle fishing boat would find his lifeless body before it sunk.

In some single-minded stupor, Will followed the length of the path until the house figured small and unobtrusive in the horizon, if he turned to look. When his leg faltered, when pain bit vicious at his bones, when his feet dug into the sand and he thought, for one flittering second, that he wouldn't have the strength to lift them, that he'd stand there rooted like a weed until he died, he'd throw the lame twig forward with a tired swing of his arm - and in Winston's energy he'd find the will to persist, and he'd take another step, and breathe, and step further still.

It was, strangely enough, a butterfly that made him stop to think. He saw it coming from afar, wings fluttering in the breeze, innocent white against the exuberant sky. Caught a glimpse of it easily, for it was the only thing moving in miles - because there wasn't a tree, a hill, a ditch to hide behind, and the little disgraceful thing could fly on and on, but Will would still be able to see it until it was a dot so tiny his vision couldn't find it amidst the blue. The butterfly flew against his shoulder, circled then to busy down in its idle little line, and Will thought, in a burst of terror, that he was much like it. Reckless in open land. Impossible not to spot. Will couldn't hide, and Hannibal would surely spot him by the road and drive him back. Here he was, his leg hurting so much he wanted to *scream*, his hair matted to his forehead, his skin

beading with sweat, his spine folding and convulsing as if trying to persuade him to crumble into the ground - and it would all be for nothing, and it'd only make things *worse*.

How long would he even take until he reached the town? Over two hours, surely. Three, at his pace. Hannibal would be back before then; he'd be driving back to the house and he'd see Will. He'd know Will wasn't yet fully broken - was he? He'd know he still wanted to leave. If Will was desperate now, how would he feel when Hannibal started locking him in his room again? The standstill would end. Hannibal would be moved back into action. No longer agreeable, no longer compliant to Will's boundaries. No, no, Hannibal would simply return to an empty house - had Will even closed the door, when he went out? -, and gone would be his whim of friendship, and they'd be predator and prey again.

Where could he even go? If he stopped following the path, he'd be simply wandering in the plains. There was no promise of finding anything - finding *anyone.* How much longer could he walk? How long had it been? Definitely over an hour, surely less than two. Was he really going to venture into the middle of nowhere for the flimsy fucking possibility of shelter? He'd collapse in the weeds. He wouldn't get up. Maybe Hannibal would drive out of the path to find him; he wouldn't pay attention, and he'd run over Will's figure in the sand.

It was fucking ridiculous.

What was Will *doing*?

Victims, despair, hope, what was he *thinking*?

He had to go back. Fuck, he had to go back to that house before Hannibal saw him. He couldn't know. Will was fine, it would all be fine, he just had to get the fuck *back.*

And he turned, and the house was but a blur in the distance, and he couldn't see the butterfly any longer, and it'd been so *long* since he'd started walking, how could he ever find the strength to walk all the way back?

He should sit. He should rest for a while by the side of the road. Perhaps a car would drive past him. Perhaps he could ask for help.

Perhaps that car would be Hannibal's. Perhaps he was already driving back.

Wiping the sweat off his forehead with a trembling hand, he firmed his fingers round the cane and set out walking back, hunched, panting.

The sun set high while he walked. It was past noon, he could tell. The sun burnt his flushed skin. His shoes drowned in the warm sand. His vision was a set of stains, hyper-focused on that little wooden dot in the horizon.

How funny. He'd never thought he'd endeavour to get back to that house.

Truly, there had to be some kind of sadistic karma latched onto him.

Then again, it could just be Hannibal's influence.

It had to be around lunch time. When had Hannibal left? Ten in the morning? Had he been walking for three hours? It couldn't be. Earlier, in bed, he remembered how much his leg had ached and whined; how embarrassing it had been when his muscles had relented under Hannibal's encouraging gaze, and he'd given up on his silly daily exercises. How could that leg be the one supporting him now? Trembling so violently, a weed in a storm, while Will *dragged* himself back? It couldn't be, it simply couldn't be, and the house was closer now, the kind of distance one could run in five minutes, but Will *couldn't* run, and his pace was maddening under the overwhelming pressure behind his back, the frantic itch on his shoulder telling him that, if he dared look back, he'd see the truck driving toward him in the horizon - and what would he do then, faced with such inevitable failure, knowing he'd never reach the house before Hannibal reached him, standing uselessly on the side of the road? How stupid he'd been, truly, how *fucking* stupid, to let himself dream of inconsequential catharsis - to think he could go on his little ridiculous excursion without repercussions, to forgo any fucking inch of rational thinking in favour of some romantic notion of leaving, and walking, and not turning back.

Life wasn't easy. It wasn't *fortuitous*. No, Will's prudent plans crumbled, Will's strategies were pointless, and this - whatever this insanity could be called -, that'd been born surely of some momentaneous psychotic break, that had no head to think nor feet to stand on, could never *ever* work.

He'd fucked it all up.

There was nothing else to do.

The sun burnt Will's skin, Winston was barking a few steps ahead, Will's sight blurred for just a second - his foot got caught on a loose root, and maybe, *maybe* Will could have untangled it and carried on, but he had not strength, and his leg faltered, and he fell.

Didn't even hurt much. The sand was soft. Warm. It was pleasant.

His leg, that was torture. That was unimaginable. That was rusty needles on each atom; it was blood frenzied against his skin, it was arteries dangerously engorged, it was veins pale and shrunk, it was muscle ripped and bone powdered.

But hadn't he said he didn't care? Hadn't he thought: let it rot?

Let it rot, then. Right there, by the edge of the road. Where it was pleasant, and the sand was warm.

Except he really couldn't.

It seemed to *easy,* but he couldn't.

Because Will had driven in that road before - he'd been there under the night sky, running the opposite direction. He'd been the winner, once. Lost, afterwards; but for a moment, yes, he'd won. And he'd driven back under the warm sun - he'd stabbed Hannibal with a kitchen knife, he'd waited quiet in the empty train station with a bloodsoaked shirt under a stolen coat. He'd kissed Linette - tender, sure, because he was still capable of that. He'd shot people, he'd

murdered - thousands in his head -, he'd tamed the cannibal once into something deluded and pliable. And he'd thought, a long time ago, when he was bleeding out with the distant sounds of that train in his ear, that it truly would have been nice to see Wolf Trap again.

So, he couldn't just stay there.

He could do now, rather, what he hadn't been able to do that night, when the blood was rushing out of him, and his conscience had run thin.

Will could crawl.

Sinking his elbows into the sand, burrowing the blunt of the cane ahead of him for balance, digging his good foot to push himself forward, then slowly dragging his lame leg. It brushed, strained, ached against the little weeds - Will wondered how on earth his stitches hadn't opened yet; wondered if they actually had, if he was leaving a bright red river behind him.

Winston, eventually tired of running about, came to nuzzle at Will's shoulder, licking the sweat off his face. It helped a little - he obstructed Will's view of the house, and Will could pretend it was actually so close, just a minute more, sinking his elbows three more times, two, one - ten, and counting down again.

And the sets of ten dwindled down, and the house grew close, so close, and inevitably - though it hadn't been inevitable, had it? he'd been laying by the road wanting to die less than an hour ago - his hand was pushing at the little open inch of the sliding door - he *knew* he'd left it open, he fucking *knew* it - and dragging himself into the living room.

It was twisted, really.

He'd hated the sight of those couches, that room, that house.

It all seemed heavenly now.

He dropped the cane carelessly on the floor and hoisted himself onto his couch. Picked his leg up and laid it neatly along the length of it, fussed around with it like a mother would a sickly child; placed a pillow between his head and the armrest, hysterical when he finally put his head down - not on sand, not on dirt, but on pretty fabric and light feathers.

Between two heavy blinks, he looked around at the mess he'd left. The sliding door was almost fully open, sand scattered everywhere, little gold grains scratching at floorboards, his cane abandoned by the coffee table. He was sure the sand had also embedded in his clothes, little weeds between the fibers. Maybe even in his hair. A fucking disaster.

But then Winston came in with a little flutter of his fur and settled down on the rug beside Will. Every worry disappeared. It'd all be fine. He'd done it.

Blindly, lazily, eyes slipping closed, he stretched his arm out in search of Winston's head. Before he could find it, he fell asleep.

In his dream, he was swimming. It was storming - *finally*, it stormed, and he cut through the grey waves. There was a boat, a hand to pull him on deck before he was swallowed by the water. As he leaned against metal planks, coughing salt - and it looked, in his dream, like he didn't have one leg; and it looked, in his dream, like he was wearing the clothes he'd picked up off the floor that night -, the boat began to near the shore. Italy, again. And Will looked to the cabin - it was Hannibal on the wheel.

'Will. Will.'

There was no real difference between the face he'd conjured in his mind and the face looking down at him when Will pried one eye open - Hannibal was not someone who could be distorted by subconscious whims. He was as he was, and not even the abstract wonderings of a dream could ruffle his hair out of place.

'What happened?

Will blinked, the edges of his surroundings coming into focus. His leg still burnt. Every muscle, in fact, was on fire. Hannibal was leaning over him with a frown.

'Was playing with Winston. Hurt my leg.'

All true, all said with the bleariness of sleep, and so nothing in his expression could really indicate a lie; not a hint that the scattered sand, the stray weeds woven into his hair, the cane thrown into the floor had been caused by anything dishonest.

Hannibal's frown only deepened.

'I distinctly recall asking you not to overwork yourself,' he huffed, superficial annoyance to lamely disguise his worry.

'Hannibal,' Will sighed - because fuck him being concerned, fuck tending to his nervous expression, fuck reassuring that protective instinct he had no right in having, 'Would you just get me some coffee?'

'Of course.'

Hannibal disappeared into the kitchen while Will struggled to sit up, his head spinning. Winston wasn't on the floor beside him anymore - by the window, thousands of little golden grains still glistened in the sunlight.

It was quite satisfying to imagine how much it was bothering Hannibal. To picture him cleaning it up.

‘Did you get my books?’ he asked. His voice cracked, his throat dry.

‘We can discuss that later,’ Hannibal’s words came in from the other room.

Will bit his lip into little irregular grooves until Hannibal returned with a cup in his hand. Smoke clouded over it in thin wisps. It warmed his hands when Will took it.

‘Tell me, what exactly happened?’

‘I already told you.’

Hannibal’s lips curled, ‘Have you pulled any stitches?’

‘No. I don’t think so.’

‘Would you allow me to make sure?’

He had the decency, at least, to act with proper decorum. To *know* the question would make Will uncomfortable. It was much better than all the times he’d pretended his overstepping was ordinary - he touched him, and it was normal; he hand-fed him, and they were *friends*. No, now at least Hannibal seemed reticent; and how beautiful was that, how breathtaking, when it meant that Will’s answer actually mattered?

‘Later.’

‘Will, if you’re bleeding then I should take care of it as soon as possible.’

‘I’d have bled through my pants already, if I really was bleeding,’ Will pointed out, ‘I’m fine. Where are my books?’

Hannibal sighed, but he didn’t - for *once* - push.

‘They’re on the dining table.’

‘Can you get me one?’ not even a sheepish 'please', because he’d been noticing, for those infernal weeks, that Hannibal truly was agreeable - that, whenever Will asked for little things, domestic little niceties that in nothing related to Will’s freedom, to their *situation*, Hannibal was quite eager to comply.

He wondered why he hadn’t explored that sooner.

Then again, he hadn’t asked Hannibal for much before. For anything. Before, he hadn’t needed help.

Once more, Hannibal promptly disappeared. He returned quicker this time, however, a book in hand.

‘Traveling?’

‘Spain. I thought you’d enjoy it.’

‘Have you read it?’

‘Yes,’ Hannibal nodded, giving Will a look, ‘I have it in my study. But, as you said, you didn’t want any book I owned.’

Will chuckled, feeling the contours of the hardback book. The cover was light blue, silver flourishes framing it.

‘Thanks,’ he opened it on the first page; looked at Hannibal over it, finding him still standing there quite uselessly, ‘Hannibal?’

Hannibal, when he spoke, sounded tense.

‘I really do believe it would be best if I checked your injury now.’

‘It’s *fine*.’

‘Will, I really must insist-’

‘Why, Hannibal?’ Will snapped, ‘Are you just looking for another excuse to touch me?’

Hannibal’s mouth thinned down into a bitter line. He was still standing between Will and the coffee table, hands by his sides, not properly angry but definitely *irritated*. And Will hated that they were about to argue like that, while Will sat awkward on the couch, unable to firm his feet into the ground, to puff his chest out like any pesky man in any pointless fight, to stretch his legs out and tip his chin up and let his height tower over his pitiful words. So many people shouted every day over meaningless disagreements - here Will was, and it was his freedom, his fucking *life* he fought for, and he had no dignity. He sat, a child being scolded, arms crossed, fury ill-fitting in the softness of his posture.

‘Not without your permission.’

‘Are you *fucking* kidding me? *Now* my permission matters to you? *Now,* Hannibal, after all the shit you put me through? Why?’

A subtle discomfited ripple went through Hannibal’s lip.

‘Because of what you offered. Friendship.’

Will laughed, tired and sour faced with Hannibal’s candour.

‘Is that all you needed, then? Motivation? You want us to be friends, and live together, and eat meals together, and what - *kill* together? I don’t *fucking*-’ and it was so mortifyingly childish, so utterly beneath the pretentious subtlety of their past, but Will had been through too much that day - he’d dragged himself across the fucking *ground* that day -, and he was so tired, so sick of everything, and he threw that stupid fucking book across the living room, the light blue cover flicking open like a bird’s wings, pages flittering for one moment of elegance before it crashed dull on the floor, ‘...how long am I here for, Hannibal? How long until you realize we can’t play house?’

Hannibal hadn't for a moment taken his eyes off Will. Even when the book went flying past him, barely a muscle in his face twitched.

'Is what I ask for that unimaginable, Will? Had you not considered it in Baltimore, when you were leading me on at Jack's orders? Did you not dream of cutting ties with your life and starting anew with me? What is so different, then?'

'I didn't *choose* this!'

'But you wanted to.'

'I'm not so conceited as to believe I can do whatever I want, Hannibal. I was going to turn you in. You'd be in prison. You'd lose.'

Hannibal's gaze bordered on condescending - cold, however, set firmly atop his face, an inconspicuous mask.

'You forget that I uncovered your roose, Will. I could have vanished in an hour. I could have slipped off into the night, and you never would have seen me again.'

'No,' Will's tone was calm, factual; eyes on the empty coffee cup he was still holding, 'You get me coffee, Hannibal. You buy me books you already own. You love me. If I'd asked, you would have stayed.'

Just like that, the condescension went. Hannibal wasn't guarded anymore; not even an attempt to deny Will's words. Instead, he regarded him with something akin to resignation.

'Would you have asked?'

Will smiled. That was the entire point of it, wasn't it? That was the question which had been circling in Will's mind ever since that first night; that had pressed on under the bridge of his nose and fit itself between every idle thought. That was why Will could never pretend, could never accept, could never hope to forgive.

'We'll never know.'

The tension deflated between them. Silence spread. The breeze was swirling in through the open window, Winston's distant barks outside.

'Will, if you want to keep fighting then I cannot stop you. You told me, however, when you crawled into my bed, that you deserved some rest. Do you not believe that still?'

'We don't always get what we deserve,' Will shrugged; but his shoulders were stiff, and he couldn't, not in a million years, pretend not to care, 'You should know that better than anyone.'

For once, Hannibal seemed speechless. Will sighed:

'We keep having this conversation through different words.'

‘It appears so.’

‘And it’s pointless.’

Hannibal quirked an eyebrow.

‘I mean, you were right. I can’t do anything with this fucking leg, you made sure of that. Besides, all I have to do is wait. You’ll get bored eventually. Every time I was inside your head back then, you always got bored.’

And Hannibal seemed about to say something, lips parting for a response, but Will wouldn’t have it. No, because he’d meant it - that conversation was too old, too rehearsed, too empty. Will knew each line by heart. He wasn’t interested in playing by the script anymore - he’d skirt around it now, quiet, waiting for the curtains to draw.

‘Could you get me some more coffee?’

And it dissipated, the solemnity of the scene; inorganically, cast out without the chance to bid its goodbye. A blunt transition - their words were filed away in the unspoken agreement that they’d revisit them another time, when a different outcome could arise, and Hannibal leaned in to take Will’s cup.

‘The book, too,’ he managed to muster some semblance of regret, gazing down at where the book had landed. Hannibal too turned to glance at it with raised eyebrows, ‘I shouldn’t have thrown it.’

‘You’re tired and upset. It’s perfectly understandable.’

‘Plus, you were being a dick,’ Will retorted, no real bite to it, even gentle, as Hannibal grabbed the book off the floor and handed it to him. Hannibal grimaced at his choice of words, but otherwise had no reaction. He walked out the living area, heading back to the kitchen, and Will, Will who had, just a moment ago, wished for their exchange to be over, for the pointless bickering - for that’s what it was, no matter how serious the topic - to end, could now only listen to this irrational voice inside him that took in Hannibal’s silence, the neat spin of his heels when he’d turned his back to Will, and pressed on to say something else, to bristle the hairs at the back of his neck, ‘Did you see Linette?’

Hannibal stopped in his tracks. Didn’t turn, however; simply spoke, as Will took in the little tilt of his head:

‘It’s cruel of you to tease me with her.’

‘I know.’

The back of his head shook a little, like he was nodding to himself. Will watched it with morbid curiosity - as one watches a tiger from the other side of glass.

‘It’s a dangerous game to pull me into.’

Will knew that. He *knew*. But it was the only thing that rattled Hannibal - so how could he, even knowing the consequences, ignore it?

‘I thought you didn’t plan to test the efficacy of earth ovens any time soon.’

‘I don’t,’ there was a beat, heavy with the meaning of those words - and was Hannibal serious in his pledge? Was this Hannibal in his summer house in Italy, reformed and retired, swearing off his habits? Was this Hannibal sparing Linette’s life with those two little words, spoken in the measured tone that suggests some great reluctance?

Will heard what sounded like a sigh, and Hannibal spoke again.

‘I’ll get started on lunch.’

‘Alright,’ and then, before the man disappeared back into the kitchen, ‘Hannibal?’

‘Yes?’

‘After we eat - then, you can check my leg.’

He couldn’t really see it, but he was certain Hannibal was smiling.

‘Thank you.’

The book felt too heavy in his hands. As Hannibal’s footsteps echoed in the background, he opened it on the first page, and began to read. Idly, with one hand, he brushed a dry weed from his shirt.

---

In the next couple of days, Will had the opportunity to think about what he’d done.

It was impossible not to, really. The mania that overwhelmed him that day, when the sun had lightened his spirits with the preposterous possibility of hope, kept coming back in flashes: they came the very next day, which Will spent almost entirely in bed; they came the next one, and the one after that; they came each time he looked out the window, or ruffled Winston’s fur, or walked and felt the tightness in his muscles - he’d see himself by the side of the road, cane digging into sand, leaving a stinging red mark in his sweaty palm while he trudged on and on, nothing but blind determination in his mind.

He’d think, then, spying Hannibal in the corner of his eye: how strange was it that he’d gotten used to freedom as this furtive concept; that he no longer associated it with his life before, but with that drive nowhere - *anywhere* - under the endless black sky the night he’d

escaped; or the view of Linette's house from under that tree in the sun; or that improvised peregrination down the path, where he'd felt - foolishly, yes, but *genuinely* - that he could do as he wanted.

He'd been captive for too long. That's what it all came to. His life had been reduced to nothing beyond the glass panels of that house.

And it felt, somehow, in the subtext of their interactions, in the strange sense of *satisfaction* that settled in the house, that Hannibal *knew* that. That he was absolutely certain Will would stay plain and quiet in his grasp, subdued for a while longer.

Like he believed he was finally broken. Tamed.

Did he know Will had tried to escape that day? To Will, sometimes it seemed impossible that he didn't. Surely it was obvious; surely, whenever Will dared to glimpse out the window, at the line of sand and weeds across which he'd dragged himself that day, the guilt was evident in his eyes.

Then again, the next time Hannibal went out - to buy Winston's toys, now - he still left every door unlocked. Still left Will with same look of concealed satisfaction, the proprietary pride of someone securing a possession.

So perhaps he didn't know. Or he did, and he didn't care.

After all, what could it have proven besides Will's helplessness?

The days unfurled as slow as they always did, in any case. Their routine hadn't changed: the meals, the morning exercises, the careful circling around each other, the polite chatter. They drank wine and whiskey after dinner. Hannibal asked Will about his book. Will made merciless fun of Hannibal's outfits, still too formal, still too layered for the heat. Made the mistake, then, of complimenting one particular combination - 'See, casual looks good on you' -, which got him an insufferably fond look.

In short, it was tedious. Tedious to the point of hopeless.

And Will's stroke of energy crumbled with each cold dusk. That reckless impulse was but an echo in the back of his numb mind. He sank into the idleness from before, lazy, plastered to the couch, dry in his words, eyes glued to his book.

Didn't even like it much. Spain felt too much like Italy for his taste.

He was beginning to think that he'd never leave that state - that he'd only worsen into catatonia again, and stop exercising his leg altogether, and spend the rest of his days in that damn couch, and let his mind give in to the simplistic wonders of Stockholm syndrome until he was nothing more, in practice and definition, than Hannibal's friend - when, one windy afternoon, as he searched in the cupboards for more food for Winston, Hannibal approached him from behind, clearing his throat.

'Will?'

‘Yes?’

‘I’d like to talk to you about something.’

Will closed the cupboard and turned, leaning against the kitchen counter. He could hear the seriousness in Hannibal’s tone; now, he saw it on his face.

Not grave, not worrying, just… expectant.

Didn’t bode well, whatever it was.

‘Well, what is it?’

Hannibal drew a small smile:

‘I’d like to throw a party.’

‘A party?’

‘Yes. A luncheon with some acquaintances I’ve made in town,’ Hannibal nodded.

It looked, when he said it, sensible. Reasonable, *expected* even, for them, the wealthy couple - what were their names? Matthew and Lloyd, was it? - to throw a party as a gesture of friendliness toward the quaint community. In that illusion, in that pretense of reality, it was all fine and proper.

Under that, however - as it truly was -, it was crazy.

‘You want to throw a party? In this house? You want to bring people here, where you, the fugitive, live with me, your hostage?’

‘Essentially, yes,’ Hannibal’s smile only grew wider. He was clad in another subtle variation of that casual outfit Will had complimented: soft slacks, a light shirt open to expose the dip of his collarbones. He looked good, and it was frankly unfair, because he still hadn’t gotten around to buying Will some new clothes - was delaying it, Will bet -, so that Will still had to walk around with the same five outfits he always wore, and that had come out of Hannibal’s own closet.

‘Okay… walk me through it, then. Why? *How*?’

‘You know I enjoy entertaining, Will. Besides, I have been getting questions about you. People want to know why the lovely Matthew was never seen again after Linette’s own luncheon. As to how the party would be conducted, it would be nothing as boisterous as my events in Baltimore.’

Will crossed his arms tightly round himself, staring at his feet. People had asked about him. People had *noticed*. Wasn’t that good, somehow?

Couldn’t that bring hope?

He wondered if Linette had asked about him. If she had, then he wondered if she'd seen the violence in Hannibal's eye.

After all, she hadn't been charmed by him, had she? She'd told him so. Maybe she'd seen it; maybe she knew. Maybe she'd been troubled enough to call the police.

Yes. It could bring hope.

'The guests, I suppose, are collateral.'

Hannibal nodded, 'I'll kill them all, if you try anything.'

'You wouldn't. It'd be *impractical*.'

'Perhaps. But I am more likely to kill them than you are to let them die.'

And wasn't that the sad, inconvenient truth?

'Are you inviting Linette?'

Hannibal gave him a charged look, 'It'd be rude not to.'

Of course - how impolite, when Linette had in turn invited Hannibal - Lloyd - to her own luncheon. It'd be only decent to invite her back.

Plus, Will guessed Hannibal found the prospect of parading him in his arm, playing the picture perfect couple in front of her, quite appealing.

He cocked an eyebrow, wrapping his arms tighter around himself.

'So, what? Is my permission important for this too now? If I say no, would that change anything?'

'I can't imagine why you'd say no. I thought you'd like the chance to talk to people other than me,' Hannibal said, tone light, a playful smirk on his lips.

'The fact that I don't like you doesn't mean I like anyone else,' Will countered - and he looked over Hannibal's shoulder, at where Winston was laying curled on the floor with a rope lazily dangling from between his jaws, and snapped back into motion, turning away from Hannibal to keep looking for the dog food.

'Should I take that as flattery?'

Will grabbed one food can, closed the cupboard again and limped past Hannibal, who was still sporting that amused grin.

'It's factual,' he bit back, and leaned down to fill Winston's food bowl, 'But you're right. I wouldn't turn down some more company.'

'Does that mean you agree?'

‘I don’t know,’ Will craned his neck to look at Hannibal from where he was crouching down, staring at him intently, ‘Is this some kind of bullshit trick? Because it seems too brazen, Hannibal, even for you.’

‘It is a… trick of sorts.’

Hannibal had followed Will with eager steps. He looked now sheepish, hands hidden behind his back. Will stood back up, smoothed his slacks with a few sweeps and regarded him with a skeptical frown.

‘I don’t suppose you’d like to share what it is?’

‘I assure you it’s nothing wicked, Will, not this time,’ Hannibal’s smile, when he answered, was only a fraction of the humor from before. It figured mostly sad now. ‘You see, I’m aware that you and I are not on the best of terms. I was wondering if perhaps I’d get along better with Matthew.’

‘Oh,’ how fucking fresh. How fucking *wonderful*. Hannibal and Will were irremediably broken, but Matthew could forgive Lloyd; and Lloyd, in his absence of character, was still worthy of love. ‘I thought we were done pretending.’

‘Let’s not call it pretend, then,’ Hannibal shrugged slightly, running an absent hand through Winston’s fur as he sauntered past to lap at his food, ‘It’s simply an opportunity for you and I to have a pleasant afternoon without dwelling too much on our situation. I thought it might lift your spirits. Besides, everything I said before still stands. This seems like the most effective way to prove to the town that you’re perfectly fine. And I do miss cooking for parties.’

The last words Hannibal said with a grin, and in it Will could see, just as if he’d been transported in time, each night Hannibal had laid a plate in front of him, Alana and Jack at his dining table, and sat at the head with fork and knife in hand, and smiled that shark smile of his.

How they hadn’t known what he was sooner, Will would never understand.

‘You get that this might not go your way, don’t you? I might… do something. Surely you know that.’

‘Will-’ Hannibal cut himself short, hesitated for one moment, then stepped closer, the tips of his shoes an inch from Will’s, Winston’s tail grazing his leg, and held Will’s elbow softly, just the barest of touches. His tone, when he spoke, was lower, intimate, ‘You told me once that you did not feel alive anymore. Perhaps this might solve it.’

As if a party would help - as if being surrounded by people, with their full names and full lives, their furnished houses and untarnished freedom, could pull Will from his numbness. He’d walked under the sun for hours until he’d collapsed; he’d pondered death laying at the edge of the road; he’d run in the most irrepressible surge of rebellion, and still, escaping all that, *resisting* all that, he didn’t feel any more alive. His skin might be burnt, his muscles abused, but it didn’t seem to matter. No, that party could mean only disaster - it would bring

nothing but depression, but despair, cornered by everyone's freedom as he smiled with his arm linked to a metal chain.

But Hannibal's eyes, so honest, so worried, made him *want* to feel thankful. They made him want to believe it might help.

After all, he did mean it. It was reckless. It was downright fucking *stupid*. They were bringing other people into that house. If Will wanted, he could slip someone a note, could whisper, could mouth the words: 'call the police'. He could be rid of this. He hadn't wanted to turn in Hannibal at first, but maybe, if it was his only option, he could do it. It's not like he didn't deserve it. Yes, just a note, just a second where Hannibal wasn't looking, and he could get out.

Or Hannibal could see. Kill everyone, and the sun would set with its last beams reflected on a pool of blood.

Either way, it was dangerous. Either way, it could destroy their peace there.

And Hannibal was doing it for fun. He was doing it to cheer Will up.

It was hopeless. Ridiculous.

Will was still grateful.

'Okay. Okay, we'll do the party,' he nodded. And then, because he didn't want to say it in words, but he needed Hannibal to know, he squeezed his forearm gently - just a second, the most contact he'd initiated since he'd slipped into Hannibal's bed that night. A silent 'thank you' that warmed Hannibal's gaze, that made him in turn hold Will's elbow tighter for a moment before completely letting go.

'I will enquire in town for a convenient date.'

They stood for a moment in this aura of softness: Hannibal a little dazed, Will disbelieving of the entire thing. But Winston made a particularly loud sound as his paws scratched on the floor, and the spell was broken - Hannibal straightened the line of his shoulders and firmed his jaw, Will stared down with a small frown.

'Yeah, you do that. Just get me some new fucking clothes before then.'

Hannibal laughed.

'I'll be sure to do that. Though you'd look wonderful in whatever you chose to wear.'

And with those last words, that made a flush grow unbidden in Will's cheeks, the moment ended. Hannibal retreated up the stairs, most likely into his study. Will decisively didn't watch him go; instead, he watched Winston eat until Hannibal's footsteps were no longer audible.

He scratched his head. It still felt, even throughout the days, that between the curls of brown hair were little green stems and dry leaves entwined. Like he was still outside, laying in the

sand, dragging himself toward that house. Like he was still under the sun, by the road, hearing Winston’s barks from afar.

Like he was inside the house, but the house itself was beginning to merge with the golden plains; and from between the floorboards would sprout weeds, and from every crook and corner sand would pour, and the house, this fortress, this jail of wood and glass that had trapped him for so long, would crumble, sink beneath the earth, and give way to blue skies and clear horizons.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you lovely people enjoyed, see you guys in the next chapter ;)

PS: Let's pray that I can keep up this 'posting before two months pass' thing I have going on xD

# Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

We're back!

And it's been like two weeks??

I hope that my newfound fanfic productivity now that I'm quarantined proves my devotion to you guys - it's not laziness, it's real life that keeps me from my passion of laying in a couch for hours writing soft pornography for you.

Speaking of pornography, there's smut in this chapter, so, if you're social distancing with family, I'd suggest reading this in your room ;)

It's around 15000 words, and it's the FIRST part of the party. Original plan was giving you guys the whole party in one chapter but it was becoming worryingly massive, so we've two parts now, but don't worry, the next chapter shouldn't take too long to post either!

Oh, and we've officially crossed the 100.000 words milestone! How strange to think this all started with one thoroughly filthy would-be oneshot, and some comments asking for more. Honestly it's ironic that the fact that you guys are horny as fuck led us to all this plot xD

Okay, my friends, sit back and enjoy, I hope this relaxes you a bit from the stressful times we have going on, and I hope you're staying safe <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will wished they hadn’t gone to Italy.

It ruined moments like this, when he was laying in one of the lawn chairs outside, the afternoon sun a crisp heat on his skin, just the barest breeze, sometimes, to put his hair in a disarray, Winston’s barks a reassuring sound in the distance, his book on his stomach, lifting slightly up with each indolent breath, the sun so bright his eyelids were instinctively kept shut, so that dozing off presented itself not only as an option but as the very suggestion of Nature.

Times like this, so close to idyllic, corrupted by the memory of why he laid there. The blue sky, the high sun, the graceful fragrance of the ocean - all tainted, all corrupted by the reminder that Will had cut through that sky and flown over that sea with drugs in his system. A point of pride, then, to hate the entire country. A symbol.

It was fucking unfair.

Because he used to like Italy. He dreamt of visiting.

And it was just as he had imagined it - the sun-kissed skin, the blurry horizons where sky met water - and now he had to hate it.

No matter how fucking *nice* it felt.

How easy it was to unwind, to clear his mind, to fall asleep and indulge in some decadent peace and quiet.

Other things, of course, could ruin it.

The smooth sound of the sliding door as it was pushed open, for instance.

‘Will?’

Idly, Will turned his head in the direction where Hannibal’s voice was coming from. He didn’t open his eyes, though; simply let the hot spots of orange and yellow pulse against black in the back of his eyelids.

‘I’ve brought you some clothes. Possible sets for the party.’

The party - all Will could think about these days. It’d be set in three days, and Hannibal was constantly fussing over its details, while Will mulled over its *possibilities*.

‘Yeah?’

His voice cracked. Hannibal had been gone for about five hours; he hadn’t spoken since he’d bid him goodbye.

‘Would you care to try them on?’

‘Did you get anything with patterns?’

He heard Hannibal’s laugh, low and harmonious from afar.

‘I did not. Though I should warn you, I’ve bought no flannel either.’

'Oh, I think I'll live.’

‘Will you try them on?’

‘Now?’ Will scrunched his nose. His eyes were still closed, orange flares shifting amidst darkness, and it felt as if, as long as he didn’t open them, reality would stay appropriately away.

‘If you would.’

He sighed. Grabbed the book on his lap, closed it, placed it beside him on the lawn chair. With its weight no longer tethering him there, his eyes flickered. Letting the light in. Living again. He sat up, ran a hand through his face, finally dared to open his eyes.

Hannibal was leaning against the window frame, beige slacks, thin wine coloured shirt, bags pooled at his feet, staring amusedly at Will.

He really was getting better at dressing casual. Around him now spread a haze: the sweet scented boredom of vacations, the implicit lack of purpose of holidays.

Will figured he looked very much like Lloyd ought to look. All patience, all calm; face a balance of curves softened by the type of constant contentment one gets from being with the one they love.

A happy man in a happy relationship.

And in those bags were the clothes that would make him Matthew - and so, wasn't it right to say those clothes would make him happy, those clothes would make them friends?

He got on his feet. His bones creaked, his left foot rested unsettled on a patch of grass. But he didn't look back, or devote a moment to reluctance. After all, the sky, the sun, the ocean, the lawn chair - as he was meant to, as he was expected to, he hated them all.

Upstairs, Hannibal set the different pieces on Will's bed with laughable care.

'I hardly think I need a suit.'

'Everyone needs a good suit, Will.'

'Well, do I need a good suit for *this* occasion?' Will furrowed his brow, threading his fingers through the sleeve of a brown jacket.

'We're the hosts, Will. God forbid we were underdressed.'

'God forbid indeed,' Will drawled. And he stood in front of the bed, counting the myriad of different pieces he was supposed to try, and could only think of the infinite number of movements, stretches, clenchings they required - and the effort it would take to squeeze into each one, and flatten all that fabric across his skin, and fiddle with buttons and straighten lapels, and all, in short, to see them dangle awkward from his shrivelled body.'

'Am I supposed to try on all of these?

'It would be best, yes,' Hannibal answered, 'Of course, there's certain sets I favour. The blue shirt, for example - I believe it would match your eyes quite well.' then, when faced with only silence, 'Will?'

'Yeah. Yeah, okay,' eventually, Will nodded, gaze still wary on the clothes, 'I guess I'll start, then.'

The process wasn't too difficult, at first. Hannibal had taken a seat on the only unoccupied corner of the bed, and standing in front of him shrugging in and out of clothes was uncomfortable, but not impossible to ignore. It reminded Will of when he'd woke in Hannibal's bed that first night in Baltimore - the almost stolen sense of discomfort, then, for it wasn't his own nudity that unsettled him; it was the knowledge of its effect on Hannibal.

Now, with all this nonsensical negotiations of friendship and forgiveness, with the promise of Hannibal's self-control, with this man - this murderer - all tense where he sat, legs neatly crossed to take as little space as possible, gaze never persisting for too long before falling to the floorboards, as if Will's bare chest, between prospective shirts, was too much of a temptation - faced, in short, with so much discomfort on Hannibal's part, it was very easy to forget his own, and find it instead, in a vicious sort of way, fun.

'Why on earth would you get something yellow?'

'I thought it might break from your usual monochrome,' Hannibal's smirk was a little crooked, a little mischievous, 'It would do you no harm to have some colour in your wardrobe.'

'Well, I'm not trying it on. Pass me that one, the other one, to the left,' and, in turn, he threw the one he was wearing - which was a somewhat acceptable tone of peach, and the consistency of butter on his skin - at Hannibal, who'd been carefully folding each piece Will tried on with only the fewest huffs of irritation.

'As much as I do love the look of these shirts on you, Will, it's perhaps time you wore some of the pants I picked out. We need a complete set, after all.'

Will scratched the bridge of his nose, glimpsing at the pile of slacks laid out. His leg was already beginning to complain from standing for too long, and he grimaced at the thought of all the acrobatics required to fit into each pair.

'Do I really have to try them?'

'It would be foolish to purchase them without first seeing how they fit on you,' Hannibal's gaze grew kind, 'Would you like my assistance?'

'It's fine,' Will hissed, and he sat down on the edge of the bed to take off the pair he was wearing. He ignored the weight of Hannibal's eyes on him as dutifully as he ignored the ever-present bandage on his thigh, branding him as an invalid each each time he changed, 'Just fucking inconvenient, is all. And it's your fucking fault, you know?'

Hannibal drew those small smiles that speak so vaguely of regret, like a well practised prayer to a God in which one doesn't believe:

'If it helps, it still hurts when I laugh,' and he gestured at his middle, where his own bandage was hidden out of sight.

'Well, it's a good thing that you don't do it often, then,' Will mused, pushing the first pair of pants up to his hips and fiddling with the zipper.

'Excuse me?'

Hannibal actually sounded surprised. Will stared at him with his brow furrowed as he stood and straightened the waistline above the dip of his pelvic bone.

‘You used to laugh before, in Baltimore. For all your stubbornness in bringing me here, you laugh much less now. The pants - what do you think?’

‘They fit quite nicely. Are they comfortable?’ Hannibal’s right eyebrow was perfectly arched in remembrance of a critic; his words, though, detached, distracted, as if running on the background of his mind.

‘Yeah. Yes, I think I’ll keep them. The shirt, now.’

‘Which one?’

‘The one you liked.’

Hannibal’s smile was eager, and he stood from the bed to hand him the delicate piece of clothing. Will snorted.

‘I can put it on myself, thank you.’

‘I never thought otherwise,’ Hannibal retorted, all lighthearted eyes, as if he could ever feign innocence. As if Will could ever take the twinkle in his eye for anything except dishonesty.

Not like it mattered, in any sense. Any hidden intent would go frustrated inside Hannibal’s skin - and Will would see only its rebellious limbs trying to slip out, squirming in the cracks of Hannibal’s composure.

So, he put on the shirt slowly. Leisurely, and there was one brief second where he held Hannibal’s gaze as it travelled up from Will’s bare chest, and Will *knew* he was looking, knew he liked, for some inexplicable reason, the vision of Will’s pale, withered form. Hannibal didn’t show shame as he was caught staring; neither did Will as he was observed - he drew his arms inside the sleeves, did the buttons up with deft fingers, and asked as if in casual remark, as if this weight of stares hadn’t just crossed between them and he was a blissful mix of oblivious and unaffected.

‘So, what do you think?’

Hannibal returned to reality with a slow intake of breath. Will could see the outline of his Adam’s apple waver as he swallowed.

‘The collar is crooked.’

Will’s fingers itched to correct it, but then he caught the little pained twitch in Hannibal’s cheek, and thought that somewhere to their right was his bedroom window, wide open with sunlight filtering through, and Will could look at it and feel the urge to love it, and have it in his head hammered that he could not - and if this self-imposed hate could be so consuming, and if Will could ache so much to be in beautiful Italy and spare it only fury, then to Hannibal the view of Will in front of him, close enough to touch, had to be just as maddening, just as exhausting, and Will could, in the corner of his mind reserved only to petty vengeances, abuse that.

‘Fix it, then.’

And Hannibal's face coloured in surprise, in *reticence* as if he'd been presented a gift so great it could only be a hoax, and it made something inside Will stumble blind into some sort of precipice - an inch from the cliff, and the promise of a thrill below.

Hannibal was almost reverent as he straightened Will's collar in a succession of lingering touches - and he let his hands settle above his collarbones, curled around his shoulders with featherlight pressure.

'There. It's perfect now.'

'And how do I look?'

Hannibal's gaze was slow as it travelled up Will's figure. Will could *feel* it, greedy and sticky on his skin - could feel Hannibal's tongue lining the same path, Hannibal's fingers ghosting over it, and Hannibal *surely* had to be picturing the same thing, because his expression seemed almost pained, his grip tightening momentarily on Will's shoulders.

'I was right. It matches your eyes.'

Will arched an eyebrow, 'Is that all?'

Hannibal seemed almost amused.

'Cruel boy,' he uttered, and Will was about to snipe a remark at the name - because it'd been so long since he said it, and Will had almost forgotten the strange twist his stomach did at the word -, but then Hannibal's left hand was coming up to cradle his head ever so lightly, and he couldn't bring himself to say a word. Could only stare and think: would Hannibal kiss him now? Had his control been broken with nothing but a few glimpses of skin and lines of teasing words?

And what had he wanted to happen if not this, when he'd said them?

But Hannibal didn't kiss him. His control - most of it - did not break. Instead, he placed a thumb gently on each of Will's temples, his hands curling to hold his head as if it were something infinitely precious.

'Do you remember the glasses you wore when I met you? Proof that you could not see, when in fact you saw too much?'

It was really not what Will had expected Hannibal to say - but in this unsure proximity, in this sudden melancholy cast upon them as they remembered the past, Will could not find any sort of clever retort, and he nodded simply.

'My laugh was proof I was amused, when in fact I found nothing interesting at all. Do you understand, Will?'

'So… I forego my glasses, and you cease to laugh?'

'We waive pretense. I had never known how liberating it could be to laugh only in genuinity before I met you. This is to say,' Hannibal's thumbs flicked softly over Will's skin; his breath

was warm where it blended with Will's, 'there is nowhere I would rather be, Will. It's important that you know that.'

Because that house could be a claustrophobic manifestation of hell for Will, a nightmare of tangible walls and floors, but to Hannibal - to Hannibal, well, it was an idyllic enclosure. It was the heaven he'd architected with tweezers in his mind palace, nurturing it for months. It was the reality he'd choose: in the sandbanks of Italy, the snow depths of Iceland, back in the dry plains of America.

'Yeah, I know,' Will managed, 'You've made it pretty clear.'

With that, Hannibal's hands slid down his shoulders, pressed at his chest for one moment of, he assumed, pure decadence on Hannibal's part, and then the touch disappeared completely.

'Good,' Hannibal nodded, his smile turning mischievous as he added with one last heated look, 'The shirt, I suppose we're keeping it.'

It was difficult to get back into the swing of things, after that. Difficult to see Hannibal sitting on his corner of the bed when just a second ago he'd been close enough to kiss; and to know he hadn't, and that this time it had been Hannibal who resisted, and WIll who *pushed.* Difficult to stand in front of him, yanking fabric, posing, zipping, unbuttoning. Difficult, when he could stare out the window and know he was the only one - possibly the only one in Italy, the only one in the world - to feel any conflict at the pretty view. To know Hannibal saw it as a pleasant addition to an already perfect day. To know he woke up happy in that damn house - and the weather, when he opened the shutters, figured at best a convenient representation of his spirit.

Difficult, in short, to come so close to someone so happy, when he was set in feeling misery.

'I think we're done,' he shrugged, hands digging into the pockets of the most recent pair of slacks he'd tried on. And it made him heady, really, how indulgent they felt on his skin; so soft, so light, made for summer evenings, for bonfires and riverside breeze.

'Not quite yet,' Hannibal fished a piece out of the pile on the bed, 'You didn't try the yellow shirt.'

'I know,' Will huffed, 'I said I wouldn't.'

'I don't see why you won't at least try it.'

'Oh, fuck off, Hannibal,' he snapped, but Hannibal didn't even flinch. Instead, he kept his arm stretched, offering him the striking piece of fabric.

'Please, Will.'

His expression was contorted in some satire to modesty; his eyes coaxing in humble charm. Will rolled his eyes - and still, for no real reason, he found himself taking the shirt.

'You're a child.'

Hannibal's answering smile was almost comically wide.

The colour looked strange on him: too bright, too inherently cheerful, hanging off him in loose drapes, Ridiculous, and Will didn't even bother doing more than half the buttons before he threw his hands in frustration.

'Are you happy?'

Hannibal's words, when they came, were cautious; his lips twitching in an attempt to suppress a smile.

'It looks charming on you.'

'It looks- Fuck, you can lie better than that, Hannibal, I've seen it.'

Hannibal hummed, 'I do prefer seeing you without it, though you already know that.'

Will's eyes widened, and he paused where his hand rested at the hem of the shirt, about to lift it off. Still, he wasn't about to give Hannibal the satisfaction of throwing him off, so he quickly composed himself, and glared at him as if the comment had only risen in him annoyance.

'Well, you're not exactly subtle about it.'

'Oh, I rather think I am,' Hannibal's eyes had taken a distinctive glint - dark, smug, 'I did not tell you, after all, how much it pains me to spend money on covering you up. Nor did I tell you much I ached to kiss you senseless when you asked me how you looked in that blue shirt. Nor have I told you how much I want to take you off those pants and lay you in this bed right now.'

Will's mouth had gone very, very dry.

He tried to conjure a sentence - unaffected, unruffled, *dignified* - but every word imaginable recoiled into oblivion each time he dared to look, and, even if they didn't, if he had an entire arsenal of proper words to string along, he realized in panic that he had no idea what to say.

Didn't know how to react, for it wasn't the pushing of before, all imposing skin, sinking nails, biting teeth. They were words, heated but light - amused, wicked - and in him bloomed the urge to meet them, to tilt his chin up and rattle Hannibal as he'd rattled him, and he knew *how*, knew precisely which sequence of filthy words would drive the man in front of him insane, but he couldn't bring himself to *say* it.

He didn't have to, in the end. Hannibal broke into an amused smirk, and spoke for him:

'You may relax, Will. I simply thought it was my turn to do some teasing.'

Oh, but it wasn't just that. No, it'd been an outlet for wild thoughts under a convenient excuse. Will could see it in the lingering dark clouding Hannibal's eyes. Could feel it on him, the heat of his stare, as he stood there in that ridiculous shirt and fitted slacks, awkward and impatient, right leg numb from supporting most of his weight.

‘Teasing… true, though, right?’

Hannibal held his gaze without hesitance.

‘Every word.’

And that was enough prodding for one day. Enough abusing of the restrictions they’d set for themselves. Hannibal could be wishing for the conversation to extend further - to cross from jabs and hypotheticals to actions - but Will was done. He’d ignore it now, primly, as if it had never happened. Later, when no one could see, he’d dissect every word, every intent, every rushed thought process that had made him think pushing Hannibal was a good idea.

‘What do you really think of the shirt?’

And Hannibal let the spell be broken with faultless poise. Smiled, vanquished the darkness from his gaze, schooled his features into the ones of an innocent critic once more.

‘I think you should keep it. It is entirely your choice, however,’ he stood then, walked past Will and toward the door, ‘There’s still some bags I must tidy up. If you’d please place everything you didn’t like into their bags, so I can return it?’

‘Yeah. Yeah, sure.’

With one final smile, all polite and fake *innocence*, Hannibal left.

Will drew one shaky breath before turning. Above the dresser, on the wide mirror that rested against the wall, he could see himself.

Flushed, wide-eyed, hair a mess.

That ridiculous yellow shirt hanging from the sharp outcuts of his shoulders, offensive in its unavoidable joy.

And Will, watching as the sunlight caught on the fabric and made it glisten even brighter, couldn’t bring himself to place it in a bag.

Perhaps he’d been right earlier, when he’d been laying on that lawn chair, orange spots dancing around him.

Perhaps these were the clothes that’d bring him happiness.

The day of the party dawned like every other: a gentle sun, a lingering breeze, the floorboards cold under Will's feet. It dawned in the quiet of the sand backs, for the privacy of them both, precious in their solitude - and, like every other day, it felt as if it belonged only to them.

This time, however, it didn't.

The sun rose for others. The morning was a spectacle to be shared, corrupted by the existence of its audience. Because Will looked out the window, and he couldn't quite appreciate the view; instead, he wondered what others would think of it, these strangers who'd soon drive to this house, who were getting dressed in their quaint little bedrooms, fluffling their hair and straightening their clothes, scrutinizing themselves in the mirror since every one of them, every single one, was somehow under Hannibal's spell - and they came there with an empty stomach and an embellished face, the best outfits they'd fished out of their closets, to impress this man, this lie, *Lloyd,* who'd arrived with all the confidence and charm of someone who owned the town, and who had, just like that - because that's all it took - ceased it.

These guests, Will would bet, didn't even remember his existence.

And if they did, if they'd perhaps seen them in Linette's luncheon, if they'd been some of the unlucky few to wrangle out of the crowd and try to chat with him, then they surely saw him as nothing more than a nuisance, or a curious detail to enrich the party, like an eccentric centerpiece or a game of cards.

It wasn't, in the end of all these wonderings, a particular pleasant morning. It felt bleak, wrong, and the kind of grating calm that precedes a storm, and he spent most of it in his room, in his bed, staring at the wall while he listened to the occasional clinking and clashing of Hannibal's bustling downstairs.

He felt like a child forced to attend their parents' party. Like a child, overwhelmed with the urge to slither out the window and hide far out of sight until the event was over. Like a child, rooted to his bed by nothing but a thought, but a morbid *picture* of what Hannibal would do if he actually hid.

When he did summon the courage to get dressed and walk down the stairs, the dining table was already set, themed for summer with whites and blues, a jar of fresh lilies in the center, their petals dotted pink. Hannibal was sliding something into the oven, humming in tune to a melody he had on. He too was already dressed: dark grey and blue checkered slacks, a plain shirt to match in a charcoal tone. He looked good. Elegant.

'How long have you been up?'

'I woke with the sun,' Hannibal didn't even flinch at Will's voice; his answer came fluidly as he finished his task, and only then did he turn to greet Will with a smile, 'Preparations should never be rushed, after all.'

Will nodded absently and neared the kitchen island, surveying the collection of trays, plates and bowls. On one corner, striking in an exuberant red, rested a bowl of cut strawberries, and

Will leaned against the counter edge to pop one of the fresh segments into his mouth.

‘They’re good.’

The look Hannibal sent him was utterly disapproving. It made Will fight back a smile, and steal yet another piece before the other man could bat his hand away.

‘They’re for dessert. Would you like me to prepare you some proper breakfast?’

Will cocked a brow, staring around at the kitchen, which presented itself a self-contained chaos he could never hope to understand: a dynamic of paused tasks and ongoing processes scattered through different counters, refrigerating, frying, simmering, marinating in golden toned oils and resting - not forgotten, rather waiting for their turn - in different recipients. It seemed inconceivable to subtract an element from that view, as if it were a photograph, already immutable in time; and preposterous, the very notion of adding to it.

‘I think you’ve got enough on your hands.’

This time, Hannibal seemed downright offended.

‘I would not offer if it was beyond my capabilities.’

‘Yeah, I know,’ Will smirked, jutting his hip against the counter so he could lighten the weight on his leg, ‘But I’m fine. We’ll be eating in a few hours anyway, right?’

‘Around two. It would still be best if you ate something,’ and Hannibal was resuming his work, fetching a cutting board to begin dicing a colourful mix of bell peppers, but there was a worried line on his forehead, all for the prospect of Will missing breakfast, and it made something in Will unwittingly warm, some blind, unreasonable little thing he couldn’t quite push down, so he sighed and inched closer to Hannibal.

‘Really, I’m fine. Would you like any help?’

It was always so reckless to extend kindness - Will *knew* that, for then Hannibal’s eyes would go so soft, so loving, and it elicited either the unbearable urge to return that love, fake or not, just for the sake of nurturing it, or a feeling of hateful injustice, because Hannibal should not be allowed to love so *simply*, when Will’s own love was perverted and wrong and meaningless, nor to show Will that love when it had cost Will so much to refuse it.

‘If you truly do not mind, then yes,’ Hannibal stepped aside and presented the handle of the knife he was using to Will.

Gaze expectant. Waiting for Will to take it.

It weighed slightly in Will’s grip, shone in placid threat under the artificial lighting, and Will could feel the resistance of Hannibal’s flesh as he’d sliced through it, and the sound of another blade as it kissed the innerside of Hannibal’s skin on the way out, slick with blood, and it was in his hand again - pointed at *Hannibal* again -, and Will couldn’t help a burst of hysterical laughter from escaping him.

‘I could stab you again, you know?’

Because he could. He could. Right now, right this second. Oh, he might not be able to do it - Hannibal would twist his arm, dislodge each bone out of its socket; he might do it, and all those guests of ruddy cheeks and ridiculously *boring* lives would show up at their doorstep to spy through the windows a pretty dining table and a corpse; it was stupid, it was reckless, but the knife was in his hand, and he could *try*.

He didn’t want to, though.

And the blade stayed steady in his hand, and he saw Hannibal’s smile bloom playful, grow *proud*.

‘I’m well aware of that, my dear Will. Would you get started on the dicing, please?’

They worked separately, each in their own side of the kitchen, their backs turned: Will chopped the bell peppers on the kitchen island, occasionally - and more for the spite of it than for any genuine hunger - swiping more strawberry segments from the little bowl in the corner; Hannibal devoted his attentions somewhere by the oven, humming to that symphony again. From his corner, of course, came a never-ending succession of sounds, like the sizzling of something hitting the pan, or the crack of an egg, or the opening and closing of lids, that spoke of some great efficiency occuring behind Will’s back. Will, by his account, couldn’t even focus on his ridiculously simple task, and the yellow pepper pieces had come out in a grotesque scale, while the red ones could slip between his fingers - and it felt, at least a little, as he ought to care. After all, wasn’t he, at least in part, a host as well? Even in Wolf Trap, in his worst times, when the encephalitis had burnt frenzied in his head, he’d still found some amount of responsibility when someone visited his house. Now there was nothing: only petulance, only disinterest, only the unignorable presence of Hannibal behind him.

‘Regarding your limp,’ came Hannibal’s voice when Will was transferring the sticky segments into a bowl, ‘I was thinking of something that wouldn’t prompt much conversation. You caught your foot in a root, perhaps.’

Will hummed. Of course to Hannibal it would seem simple: pretending this wound that had played such a big role in Will’s life, that had stopped him an inch from freedom, that had made him bleed to unconsciousness on the ground, at night, with Winston’s frightened eyes dancing in his blurry vision - had been nothing at all.

‘I think I fell on the train tracks.’

He didn’t turn to check, but he could hear Hannibal still for a moment, before the sound of stirring began anew.

‘That might be more difficult to explain.’

‘A lie is a lie.’

Hannibal let out a laugh.

‘Alright, then. You fell on the train tracks. And what should I say, were anyone to ask me why my partner was venturing into such uncanny places?’

This time, Will fully turned, arms loosely crossed, the edge of the counter digging at the low of his back.

‘Some polite variation of ‘mind your own business.’

Hannibal turned too, just the side of his face over his shoulder as he continued cooking, but Will could distinguish a smile there all the same.

‘I shall certainly keep that in mind.’

And Will had to turn away then, because the view was too domestic, because Hannibal’s smile had bloomed too *easily*, so he lowered his gaze back to the cutting board, chopping yet another yellow pepper with clumsy slices of his knife.

Not that he could keep Hannibal out of his mind for too long. It was the universe’s way, after all, that if Will’s eye could not stray to Hannibal, then Hannibal would in turn gravitate towards him, and soon enough Will felt warmth against his back - not quite a touch, but a promise of it, hovering an inch away.

‘You look very handsome today,’ was Hannibal’s casual comment, spoken from somewhere above Will’s shoulder, and Will knew the intent behind it - because Will was wearing that blue shirt, the one Hannibal had traced over his skin, and now what could Will do but remember that moment where he’d looked into Hannibal’s eyes and seen love, and felt not the urge to run but to *push*? What could he do but remember the way Hannibal’s breath had come short as he fixed his collar?

Still, it wasn’t like Will had to *show* that he remembered. That he’d given it a second thought. That it had even registered in his mind at all.

‘I’m slaughtering the peppers.’

He pointed at them with the tip of his knife - which could, so easily, right now, if he wasn't so *fucking* weak, be plunged neatly into Hannibal's carotid.

Hannibal’s chuckle, soft and seemingly unperturbed by the fact that Will had ignored his comment, tickled the back of Will’s neck.

'So I see.'

'Probably best if I stop.'

'I wouldn't say so. I'm quite enjoying your presence.'

Will rolled his eyes, 'Don't act like I'm not distracting you. I'm interfering with all the preparations.'

And he said it drily, punctuated the last word in bitter distaste, for with it came the picture of all the cars driving their way - all these people in pretty summer clothes about to invade their solitude, these people who could once have figured a relief, who now felt only inconvenient, *torture*, since their very lives were currency for his freedom. They'd run their empty little mouths all afternoon and drive drunkenly back to their homes - if Will stayed quiet. They'd land in their beds safe and sound - if Will, in turn, was still in that house by nightfall.

Hannibal's smile grew curious.

'Have I distracted you?'

Will glanced at the jumbled pieces of pepper, red and yellow and green, all of ridiculously different sizes.

'You always distract me.'

'Oh? And is that again merely factual, or may I consider it flattery?'

And Will couldn't take another moment of feeling Hannibal's breath so soft against the back of his neck, his presence so invitingly near, so he finally turned, all tense muscle trapped between Hannibal and the island, his gaze not quite meeting Hannibal's, burrowing instead somewhere in his chest, in the fabric of his pristine dark grey shirt.

'Take it as an insult. I'll let you work.'

He walked off, leaving the kitchen, that unspoken promise of warmth. Sat in the living room, where the record was playing and the symphony echoed loud, bouncing confined amidst those walls.

It was a shame. He really would have liked another strawberry.

Hannibal didn’t follow him, didn’t show his face to see where he’d gone, didn’t speak another word. At first, the distance was a relief: Will sat on his couch, and never once looked back, busying himself by watching the curve of the path through the window, where it merged with the horizon, in this morbid, senseless expectation that, if he focused enough, he’d conjure a car out of nowhere, and the guests would be that much closer, and the party would finally begin.

The symphony ended, though, a calm piano piece began to play, and there were no cars in sight.

The distance, then, with each ivory key pressed by the pianist, began to shrink, until Will couldn’t ignore the sounds coming from the kitchen anymore; couldn’t rid himself of the ghost warmth plastered to his back; couldn’t undo the picture of that same couch fitted snug between the counters, his face inches from the oven, suffocating in a cloud of fumes - the taste of smoke crawled up his throat, he stood in a jump and slid out the window, hurrying around the house to the pair of lawn chairs in the sand banks.

He could still see the path from there, if he craned his neck. He settled down to watch.

And he thought: there had to be a moment, some fateful seconds in that afternoon, where Hannibal wouldn't be looking.

A moment where he'd be distracted.

A moment, if Will allowed himself this anxious access of optimism, under this deceiving sunlight and these sinfully unrestricted views of the sky that were always so conducive to *hope*, where Will could ask for *help*.

Because he could, couldn't he? He could think it up so simply, so that it wasn't a dilemma at all. So that there was no doubt, no reserve, only the unmistakable opportunity of *freedom*; so that Hannibal was a fool, thinking Will was so inescapably complex that he'd never take the easy way out.

It could be very simple. If he bent his mind, and squinted just a bit, and became someone just a little less himself, then it could be.

Between intakes of breath, however, there's one inevitable exhale.

One moment where his chest was bereft of fresh air.

In this moment where nothing inside him was free, came doubt.

What would he say? Were Hannibal's gaze to stray - yes, when that moment came, since it inevitably would -, what would Will dare to whisper into some unsuspecting bystander's ear? How would he, in three hushed little words, sum the urgency of his circumstances, the importance of his request, the danger of the man before them? They were helpless souls, the lot of them; how would they help? No, nothing short of calling the police would do. 'Call the police', then, he'd whisper that - and what would be the reason? He was Will Graham, he'd been kidnapped? He was Matthew, he was a victim of abuse? He was someone else, a third hollow shell asking for help, begging someone who could never hope to comprehend the complexity of the game they'd been thrown into? But Will Graham was dead: he'd run out of breath that night in Baltimore, he'd gone pale over the Atlantic ocean, he was buried now by that little church. And Matthew, poor Matthew of no life at all, was too inconsequential - who would care if this strange man claimed to be abused? Oh, he'd whisper it to someone's skeptical ear, and this stranger would glimpse - just once, just a *millisecond* - at *Lloyd's* irrecusable charm and label Will some demented, melodramatic liar. Worse, even: this stranger would pick up their phone in a fit of bravery; the police would come, they'd look around, they'd see no proof, and they'd turn on their heels just in time to miss Hannibal's bloodthirsty eyes.

And if they found proof, would Hannibal be handcuffed away? Would Will be coddled and thrown a blanket and sent on his way for a new life? Was this what he wanted?

Was this the victory that awaited him? Hannibal in some silly little prison in some godforsaken town, sure to escape in less than a month?

Was it a victory at all? It felt more like a pause between rounds.

And neglecting the request, forgetting what he'd *say*, was Will truly going to ignore the rules of the deal? What if Will parted his lips and Hannibal's gaze snapped back to him, and he *knew*? He'd kill everyone. He'd *enjoy* it. Oh, it' be a shame - impractical, an unfortunate ending to a pleasant afternoon, tedious cleanup, a hasty move, a *bother* -, but he'd still do it. He wouldn't bat an eye.

It'd be Will's fault.

So it wasn't simple.

Hannibal wasn't a fool.

He'd imprisoned Will without chains or locks. Now, he silenced him in a crowded room. It wasn't presumptuous nor rash to think he'd get away with it.

It was just true.

Will dwelled on these thoughts as he waited, and his hatred for the event grew back, his petulance restored, some revolted part of him that was so *sure* Hannibal had devised the luncheon as means of *torture*. After all, hadn't he said he intended Will to feel alive again? What was more synonymous to life than pain?

When the first car breached the blurry blue line of the horizon, Will sat up, following its progress for a while with blank, narrowed eyes before he stood and walked back inside.

'They'll be here in less than five minutes.'

Hannibal appeared from the kitchen, wiping his hands on a washcloth.

'How many cars did you see?'

'Only one. The others will get here soon enough, though,' Will shrugged.

They walked to the front door together in expectant silence - Hannibal in complete confidence, right beside it, posture proud and hands behind his back, every bit of him the perfect host; Will planted a few steps away, close to the corner, tempted to run.

'Before they arrive,' came Hannibal's voice, making Wil look up, 'There is something we have not yet discussed.'

Will huffed, 'We've done nothing but talk about this party for days.'

'The details about it, yes,' Hannibal conceded, amused, 'We have not, however, talked about how we would conduct ourselves. I feel that I should remind you that we are, at least to the public's eye, in a committed relationship. It would be remiss of us not to behave as such.'

Will rolled his eyes. Hannibal always managed to make the most important things sound like an afterthought.

'Is this your friendly warning that you'll be plastered to my side all day?'

Hannibal chuckled, but his eyes were a shade too eager for humour.

‘Not exactly. Would you be opposed, however, to an arm around your waist, or a hand in yours?’

Will smiled wryly, leaning against the wall.

‘For the sake of appearances?’

‘Would it please you if I said yes?’

Will sighed. In all these twists, these turns of phrase, he didn’t hold any real power. Hannibal’s arm would inevitably slither around him; their fingers would always entwine. They were facts intoned as questions.

He nodded. Hannibal’s lips lifted into a soft smile.

‘And if I were to kiss you?’

This question, as it was spoken, a pitch of hesitance at the end, a waver blurring into silence, did not seem fact, but possibility.

‘Don’t kiss me, Hannibal.’

Because it felt good, when he had power, to use it.

Still, Hannibal’s  smile stood in place. He looked only a little disappointed.

‘As you wish.’

Will was aiming for a retort, a little push to sate him before he had to act nice all day, but then he heard laughter, and there was a flash of someone through the window, and people were stepping up their porch - a woman, he saw, her neck exposed in a pretty dress, the fabric emerald and her neck so pale, and faced with all that *flesh* panic burst inside Will, and he lunged forward to catch Hannibal’s arm before he could reach the doorknob.

‘Wait,’ he urged, and Hannibal stilled with a quizzical look, ‘Hannibal, do you think you’ll kill anyone today?’

Hannibal’s expression was not unkind.

‘Yes. But it is not up to me, Will. It is purely your decision.’

And then someone knocked, and the mask fell upon Hannibal’s face, and Lloyd opened the door.

‘My dear, how wonderful it is to see you! How wonderful you look - hello, hello!’ it was the woman in emerald that spoke, her arms looping around Hannibal’s neck as she kissed both his cheeks, her tone dripping with frivolous excitement, ‘We came together, me and Franzo, isn’t that wonderful?’

And she pushed into the house, all imposed familiarity, not unconscious of boundaries yet disregarding them. From behind her shuffled a man which Will assumed to be this Franzo, but then a second one and another woman all funneled into the house, squeezing against each other and through the door until they were all crowded in the hall.

‘June, how good it is to see you. But it seems you did not come alone with Franzo. Henrietta, Carlos, how are you?’ Hannibal held each guest’s hands in his own, and there was an utterance in italian that Will was not at all interested in deciphering.

‘Oh, but I was in the passenger seat,’ the emerald woman - June - murmured, as if she spoke of some great scandalous secret.

They seemed to fill the space, these two, Hannibal and June in their consuming personas, and Will wondered whether it was even worth announcing himself. Perhaps no one would pay him any notice, and they’d all filter into the dining area without sparing him a glimpse. But then June’s eyes swivelled in his direction, and widened in a great expanse of green, and she threw herself against him as if they were old friends, gripping his face with thin, vein-stricken hands.

‘You’re Matthew! What a precious face! Lloyd, you did not tell me he had such a precious face! Franzo, look at him!

Franzo, a man of broad stature and small head evidenced by a buzzcut, came forth and inspected Will with a bland expression. After one tense moment he declared something, some jumble of words in a thick accent - June laughed loud into Will’s ear, Henrietta blushed from behind them, Hannibal replied with *more* italian and a smile that had darkened, and Will, his head still in the woman’s grip, feeling the sharp ends of her manicured nails poke at his temples, had never felt more uncomfortable in his fucking life.

‘Should I say thank you?’ he said weakly, only to have June’s laugh - already ragged, as if she’d run up five flights of steps - rumble in his eardrum again.

‘You don’t speak italian? Oh, you poor- Lloyd, you beast!, why did you bring him here if he doesn’t speak italian?’

‘One does not need to know italian to know Italy,’ Hannibal said serenely, and then he was stepping towards Will, a hand gentle on his back, and June pulled back as if on command, freeing Will’s head from her cadaverous hands, ‘Besides, I thought he’d enjoy the beaches.’

It was embarrassing - humiliating, that they spoke of him like he wasn’t there, that there reigned the fluid consensus that this Matthew was an airheaded twink under the illustrious Lloyd’s arm. That Hannibal touched him now as if he owned him, and that everyone seemed to *agree*.

‘*Everyone* loves the beaches,’ Carlos rolled his eyes, flicking the side of a pristine black moustache. Henrietta, by his side, arm laced with his, nodded promptly - and what the *fuck* had Franzo said that still had her coloured red to the root of her hair, in resemblance to a disgraced saint with her hair parted in two braids and eyes so meek on her flushed face?
‘What *I'd* like to know, Matthew, is why you haven’t come down to the restaurant yet?’

Will hadn't deduced anyone in a long time. That didn't mean it had become more difficult: not when this pair before him presented itself a shamefully open book. Henrietta wore long sleeves - it was a warm day; everyone underdresses when they're drinking. She was hiding bruises, and Carlos, in his unimpressive height and ratty eyes, glistening black with the blind violence of someone so horribly insecure, had put them there.

Fuck that guy, then. Fuck Carlos and his aggressive tone, smoothed over with the most ineffective of smiles. Matthew, the airheaded twink, had every right not to answer him.

He breathed, and leaned in the most gentle of pressures against Hannibal's side. Hannibal, without missing a stride, answered for him:

'Why would he need to visit your restaurant, Carlos, when I'm here to cook for him?'

And he laughed, because when Hannibal laughed the entire world was convinced it had all been a very funny joke. Franzo's face, which had seemed, until then, like a set of emotionless clay features that had been shaped by different authors and then attached together, broke into a grin, and he said something else in italian - this time, by the laughter, Carlo's frown and Henrietta's absolutely frightened look, the joke had not been about Will.

'This cooking, then, this wonderful cooking, will we finally taste it now, Lloyd?' June said with a flourished bat of eyelashes, 'Oh, I know the others haven't yet arrived, but there must be some prize for punctuality.'

Will could feel the way Hannibal's chest inflated with pride. The man turned to face June, and his lips - on purpose, Will *knew* - brushed against Will's hairline.

'My dear June, would you settle for a tour as your prize?'

'I suppose that'll have to do,' she huffed, tone haughty, a little wink in the end. Henrietta, from her cage in the crook of Carlo's arm, let out a faded laugh, as if she was afraid someone might hear it.

Tucked into his own captor's side, Will couldn't help like her.

'But first,' Hannibal added, shifting a step away from Will to tap on the surface of the decorative dresser by the front door, 'I have one request for you. One small presumption as your host, if you'll indulge me,' his smile was all charm; Will could see, even in Frazo's blank face, the effect it had, 'Would you kindly leave your mobile devices on the first drawer? What I have planned, after all, is a retreat from all things which I have not explicitly invited.'

And with those last words, for one unmistakable moment, Hannibal's gaze fell on him. An imperceptible exchange of words between them. One round of the game over before Will had even known they'd begun.

Everyone's phones hidden away in some little drawer. Trusting, innocent, *foolish* people they were, laying at the monster's feet - and if Will tried anything, and if Will got *caught*, no one could call for help. They'd die one by one in that jail of glass.

‘How old fashioned! Wonderful, wonderful, dear,’ June remarked with an entirely delighted smile, already fishing her phone out of the little round purse dangling from her sharp shoulder. Frazo, at the same time, uttered his own comment - Will would never hear him speak a word of english, as it appeared - and the others laughed, save for Carlos, who seemed still to be stewing over Frazo’s last joke.

Once the phones had been closed inside the drawer, Hannibal returned to Will’s side, his gaze almost apologetic, as if he could truly be sorry, when he’d so evidently planned it, as if he could ever regret how helpless he made Will.

‘If you’d follow me, then,’ he announced, heading out the hall. His hand found his way to Will’s back once more, resting there in a hesitant touch - only for a moment, though, before Will stepped away with a roll of his eyes, leaving Hannibal to guide the group alone as he settled somewhere among them.

While they began the tour, Hannibal’s voice resonating in the air, Will could see Henrietta from the corner of his eye, her small frame enveloped by Carlos’s arm, dragged by his flow.

He supposed he still had some power after all.

---

The guests kept arriving in small groups, filling the house in a sea of flushed faces and generic words, hellos to everyone by everyone, hands squeezed, shoulders patted, cheeks kissed. With each new person, Will was progressively forgotten. His novelty wore off; he stopped answering the door with Hannibal, withdrew from the circles of conversation, retreated in the spaces between them, where it would seem, to the members of the first group, that he was intent on listening to the second one, and to the second one that he was with the first - and so, listening to no one, speaking nothing, he was quietly alone amidst the crowd.

He did glimpse, sometimes, when he heard a knock on the door. Watched the drawer open, the new strangers relinquishing their phones under Hannibal's coaxing smile.

Every symbol of hope neatly swept away and locked.

And he moved, fluid, attentive, orbiting around Hannibal. Stepped away when he stepped forward, turned his back to whomever was currently drinking in his words. The loophole laid there, in the distance: he did not have to endure Hannibal's arm around him, to smile, to pretend, if he was out of reach.

'I didn't see you.'

Will snapped his head up from where he was leaning against a wall, gaze burrowing into the ground, and he recognized the voice a millisecond before he saw her face - Linette was in front of him, smile crooked, hair clouding her shoulders, dress soft and white, words tumbling out her mouth in her light timbre and endearing candour:

'I didn't see you, when I looked around. I see you now. But I thought you weren't here. You didn't greet us at the door.'

She looked disappointed - she *liked* him - and this gentle fondness between them, all tender-hearted and short-legged, would *kill* her.

'Well, I'm not exactly the host. Lloyd is,' Will shrugged, 'I would have answered the door, if I knew it was you.'

Her olive eyes brightened, a little flush tinging her skin rose; Will traced it with his gaze, the same path he'd outlined with his thumb that day in her house, when he'd connected dotted freckles under his touch.

She leaned against the wall beside him - in the edges of the party with him, *for* him, and wasn't that the tenderest thing?

'I haven't seen you around. I've seen Lloyd - around town, I've seen him, and I asked 'Why hasn't Matthew come down again?', and he said you didn't feel like it. Were you sick again?'

'I fell. By the train tracks. Hurt my leg.'

'Oh,' Linette's smile grew wild, 'That's good - I mean, not good, but… I thought you just didn't want to.'

Will had wanted to. He'd wanted to - he'd been trapped. And these bullshit excuses, like he was a *free* man, like he could very well go strolling into town if he wanted to, like he could meet Linette or try Carlos's restaurant if he *chose* to, they were bitter in his tongue.

He turned away from her, staring at the crowd fit into the small living room, moving their lips to a cacophony of english and italian.

'So who'd you come with?' he asked, 'Everyone's been carpooling.'

'Francesca and Lorenzo. Have you met them? I introduced you to them - I think I did.'

'Lorenzo… the guy that loved your pâté?'

'Yes. Yeah, exactly,' Linette's blush was back; her lips tilting left in a self-conscious smile, 'We're very good friends. Really good friends. Not… just friends, though.

Will chuckled, 'It'd be alright if you were more. Only fair, really.'

Because Matthew had Lloyd, and Linette deserved someone too.

'We couldn't be. Lorenzo and I,' she shook her head, frizzy hair grazing the thin straps of her dress, 'It would never work.'

'He's not your type?'

'I don't have a type. Everyone I've liked has always been very different. And he's similar to you, in some ways - so I think I'd never like him.'

And it was the strangest thing: not love yet more than friendship. Sweet, light, a fondness that didn't burn like Hannibal's.

'Linette-'

'Matthew! Matthew, my dear!' came June's voice, high-pitched and urgent, and an instant after her arms, cold and green where her protuberant veins touched her skin, laced his waist.

He could feel Linette inch away. Just a little bit, a leaning of her neck to the side, a tensing of her shoulders - but enough for Will to feel the loss, to be swept from warm and friendly to the refined melodrama of Hannibal's world.

'You did not tell us - how could you? - that you had such a wonderful dog! Oh, wonderful, wonderful, come now, we are all swooning over the little thing,' June continued, fingers digging into Will's side as she tried to pull him forward, 'Linette, darling, come, come, have you seen it?'

Her bony hands reached for Linette, and soon they were both being dragged not quite by June's strength but by her *insistence*. She led them across the room, cutting through a group of insufferably tedious looking old men that were engrossed in some conversation in italian, until they reached a wider circle, in the middle of which, looking very content in Henrietta's arms, was Winston.

Hannibal was there too, standing out in the crispness of his outfit, the intensity of his eyes.

Like he did everywhere he went. Making everything else in the room pointless.

'Here we are, look, I brought Matthew, isn't that lovely? And our dear Linette as well - oh, I wasn't aware you knew each other.'

Will shuffled in his place, feeling the weight of Hannibal's gaze on him and Linette.

'We met recently.'

'How lovely,' June slapped her hands together, looking senselessly proud, 'Though I am offended, Linette, why didn't you tell me of such a handsome man?'

Will could see, from the corner of his eye, Linette's characteristic nervous smile, and she had parted her lips to sputter out some answer when Hannibal, in one fluid movement, slid into the narrow space between them, pressing into Will's side.

'Truly, dear June, I do not think you hold the monopoly on handsome men,' he smiled, dripping in appeasing charm, but his arm was lacing Will's back, not the reticent, respectful touch of before but one that was *territorial*, and it was almost *rude*, the way he'd done it, the way he'd insinuated himself between him and Linette, the way he now held onto him so surely in front of all those people.

It made Will fucking *seethe*.

'I wish we had a dog like this,' came a faint voice then, gentle, and Will looked down to find Henrietta staring at him with soft eyes.

He gave her a warm smile as he subtly pushed away from Hannibal, only to have the grip on his hip tighten.

'Yes, Winston's great.'

'What's his breed?' asked a man from the circle, the type of man one would find wearing a monocle, in a thick accent.

'I don't know. I found him on the street.'

'Was he hurt?' asked Linette, tone pitched in  worry.

‘Nothing quite as dramatic. My dear Matthew simply has too kind a heart, don’t you, love?’

It was Hannibal who spoke, voice imposing, saccharine - answering Linette so Will didn’t have the chance to. And Will, still fit into Hannibal’s side, tipped his head up, intending to shoot him a glare, something quick and discreet, something for only him to see, but he didn’t find Hannibal’s eyes.

He found a nose very close to his - bumping against his - and a pair of lips pressing against his own.

And Will had *asked*.

He’d asked him, he’d *told* him not to do it, and here it was anyway, a kiss, brief and chaste, the sickly sweet kind of thing that fit nicely into the conversation.

The kind of thing that would seem spontaneous, to an outsider’s eyes.

But Will, who’d been kissed by Hannibal before, who remembered the impossible tenderness with which he’d nip at his mouth and lap at his skin, who was now kissed by focused, *purposeful* lips, knew it was far from spontaneous.

It was a symbol, it was a scheme, it was a fucking *contest*.

It was the sophisticated way of shoving his tongue down Will’s throat in front of Linette, of snarling at her in primitive possessiveness. It was the territorialism of brutes heightened to something subtle, refined and infinitely pettier.

And when the kiss ended, and Will regained property of his own senses, he could hear that the conversation had progressed unperturbed. Everyone was oblivious to his rage, and they saw that kiss as *right,* as ordinary - why shouldn't they, when they were fed this empty romance? Why would they think this affection strange? How would they ever guess the hatred freezing Will's blood?

He showed it, nonetheless. For one moment, as Hannibal pulled back, he let it free in his expression. Hannibal caught it, and his eyes were resigned - sad, not regretful -, before he turned back to the conversation.

Will didn't listen to any more of it. He stood there, rigid in the crook of Hannibal's arm, feeling the man's fingers over his shirt, running small circles on his hip as if in apology, and thinking that Hannibal would truly never evolve, and that he'd never know, in turn, that Will fucking *could*.

That he had, in fact.

Because Will was not as tame as he once was. He wasn't as *controlled*. Because Hannibal could abuse, and he could torture, and he could manipulate - but he couldn't, for all his pretensions of divinity, forsee every consequence. And he thought of Will so highly, he thought of Will with such unwavering love, that he couldn't see one very simple flaw that had grown in him.

He was reckless.

Blindly impulsive, when the goal was hurting Hannibal.

And that's why he'd told Hannibal he'd kissed Linette, unthinking of what that would mean for her. That's why he'd set out walking nowhere with a rotten leg.

When Hannibal pushed, Will pushed the fuck *back.*

And if he wanted petty, he'd get it.

His chance came when they were finally sitting down to eat. He was nodding along to some elaborate story of June's, her arm in the crook of his, as they walked with the rest of the guests to the dining area. The table stretched long, the chairs were an inch from each other, and still Will wondered, as they all scrambled to sit down, how on earth they'd possibly fit.

June, in her blunt manners, crossed right through the other guests and towards the head of the table, where Hannibal was standing.

'My dear, are these seats taken, by any chance?'

Hannibal smiled; his eyes flickered to Will's.

'One, of course, is reserved for Matthew. I'd be delighted if you took the other one.'

'Wonderful, wonderful!' June held onto the back of her chair with greedy fingers, 'I'll sit here, darling, you take the other side.'

She gestured to the empty seat immediately to the right of Hannibal's. Will, however, didn't move, and through his face spread the most sickly innocence, the most well-meaning smile.

'Actually, I was thinking that I'd sit next to the Linette. We were in the middle of a conversation before, after all, and I'd love to finish it.'

It was delightful, the tightening of Hannibal's smile.

'Nonsense, love. You'll sit beside me at the head of the table. You're a host as well, after all.'

Will batted his eyelashes in that way he knew Hannibal loved, just to deprive him of the sight as he focused his attention on June instead:

'I sit next to him every day, you'd think he'd be able to last through one meal without me, don't you agree, *dear*?'

And the pet name - because Will could fake charm when he wanted to, could look precisely as enticing as Hannibal saw him, if he only *tried* - melted the woman, and red blotched between her collarbones, and she was swayed:

'Oh, I see no harm in it - and I am responsible, I fear. I interrupted you two when you were speaking earlier, will you forgive me?

Hannibal's features went tighter still, and Will could *see* his thoughts, could hear the spiralling of his mind as he obsessed over what exactly Linette and he had been talking about.

Will neatly ignored it, and directed all the warmth of his smile at June.

'It's quite alright, I'm sure we'll be able to catch up now.'

Squeezing one of her hands briefly in goodbye - just so Hannibal could see how *nice* he could be, how freely he could offer his touch to everyone except *him* - Will left them, walking to the other end of the table.

When they all sat, and Will was snug with his arm against Linette's, he could feel the weight of Hannibal's gaze on him, and for once, for the first time since he'd fucking gotten there, it felt heavenly.

Surprisingly, he didn't talk too much with Linette during the meal, despite how long it was, with pretty, elegant dishes succeeding each other, and Hannibal's proud descriptions of each one, and everyone's lengthy compliments. There was a quiet, gentle understanding between them that Will - that Mattew - had chosen her instead of Lloyd, an unspoken fact that had made her gaze soft and her fingers linger when she'd squeezed his wrist in a friendly touch - and they bumped elbows sometimes, and smiled at each other in the casual way that requires no words, and Will listened to her comment sometimes on a dish she particularly liked, sharing this lighthearted comfort from each other's presence, but otherwise Linette partook in her own conversations, with these people she knew, these people that were truly in her life, while Will settled in the edges, content with listening.

He did, sometimes, when he caught Hannibal watching from the other edge of the table, and it simply felt too irresistible, lean toward her just a little, so she'd turn and smile.

It was horrible - *he* was horrible for using her, for linking her innocence so irrevocably with Hannibal's anger, but how could he not, when it was so easy?

When it felt so thrilling?

Henrietta, who was sitting in front of him, also presented a nice distraction during the meal. Once all the appetizers were done, and they were finally on the main course, Will, who'd been watching her for some time as she spoke seldom and in a low volume, was finally moved by boredom to say:

'Henrietta, can I ask you a question?'

Her eyes grew wide, surprised.

'Yes?'

'When you got here, what did Franzo say about me?'

Just like she had before, she flushed a deep red.

'Oh, I don't know-'

'He said something in italian. About my appearance, remember?' he coaxed.

'He said-' she was failing to meet his gaze, 'he said you were pretty enough to… to.'

'Oh, I think I got it, Henrietta, thank you.'

It certainly explained why Hannibal's eyes had stormed: 'He's pretty enough to fuck'. And to know it'd been said in front of him, that he'd stood oblivious as they all stared at him with those condescending eyes, fitting him a squirming brat under Hannibal's care, made the prospect of Hannibal killing them just a little appealing.

He wondered if he would, anyway. After all, in his eye Will had surely misbehaved. Wouldn't it be simple to tell Will he deserved it, to slit everyone's throats?

When time for dessert came, Will felt a hand on his shoulder.

'Matthew, I'll need some help in the kitchen, if you wouldn't mind.'

It wasn't intoned as a request. It sounded, inside his tightly-wound control, angry.

Wary, Will stood, thrumming his fingers once over Linette's shoulder as she glanced up at him with a little smile, and followed Hannibal into the kitchen.

The man stopped behind the wall that separated it from the dining area, arms crossed, stare set, impassive. Will stepped into the private space as well, feeling a surge of relief as he was

finally away from all those strangers' eyes.

'Do you want something?' he asked, tone almost tired, dismissive, once it had become clear that Hannibal wasn't going to be the one to talk first.

'What do you hope to accomplish?'

Will frowned. Inside him, however, some kind of smug satisfaction was growing, seeing how frustrated Hannibal seemed.

Because, in all honesty, he looked about to burst.

'Just trying to have a fun party.'

'Will,' Hannibal said it as a warning, though his voice was hushed - and he stepped forward, too close, so Will tried to flee through the side, but Hannibal followed him, backing him up against the edge of the kitchen island.

'Don't you mean Matthew?' he shot back, because it wouldn't do to fold *now*.

He remembered that morning, when he'd been leaning against that island, slipping strawberry pieces into his mouth. How different the air between them had seemed, then.

The tendons in Hannibal's neck were rigid; it looked very much like he was trying not to raise his voice.

'Did I not make myself clear when I told you what would happen if you tested me?'

'Didn't I make myself clear when I told you not to kiss me?'

Hannibal sighed, and he inched even closer, towering over Will not in height but in the expectant intensity of his expression, in the way he pressed him against the edge of the counter.

'It was a lapse of judgement.'

'You don't have lapses of judgement,' Will hissed.

'An indulgence, then,' Hannibal looked disapproving, *accusing*, 'Surely you did not think I'd sit idly by while you walked around with *her*.'

Will arched one purposefully oblivious eyebrow, his voice pitched in fake innocence, 'Am I not allowed to make friends?'

'She doesn't want you as her friend,' Hannibal breathed, leaning forward, insufferably close, placing his hands on the granite surface so he was caging Will in, 'She wants you in her bed.'

It was indecent, the heat in his tone, and Will was overwhelmed by shame, wondering if the guests could hear them from the other side of the wall. He could hear their chatter, their carefree laughter - could they in turn hear them?

Still, he fought to keep his chin up, his gaze unflinching where it met Hannibal's.

'I thought that's what you wanted. A doll to show your friends, so they can say I'm pretty enough to fuck.'

Hannibal's features went very cold.

'Franzo was horribly rude.'

'They all laughed,' Will remarked, his lips tensed in a bitter line.

'They all agreed,' Hannibal hummed, and his hand lifted to cradle the side of Will's face, 'Are you certain that you don't wish me to kill them?'

That, at least, made Will suppress a laugh.

'Do you plan to?'

'It still depends,' Hannibal backed his head a little so he could search Will's eyes, 'Did you tell anyone, my dear? Did you ask for help?'

It made Will's stomach churn, that he could say no so *honestly* - that he'd been quiet, pliant, pretending. He had no strategy in place, no plan to occupy his spirits, no fucking clue on how to cease this opportunity that had presented itself to him so seemingly perfect.

How the hell was he surrounded by people, and unable to do *anything*?'

He shook his head, still, let Hannibal see the sincerity in his answer.

Hannibal's smile was liquid, it dripped sweet against Will's skin when he leaned in to kiss his cheek.

'Good boy.'

Will *hated* those words, how they reduced him to something small and weak-kneed.

'Don't say that.'

'You like it,' Hannibal purred, pressing another sweet kiss to his cheek, almost mocking, and there was truly no point in denying it, for Will knew the effect those words had in him was evident, but he still couldn't bear seeing Hannibal so fucking smug about it.

'Maybe. Not from you, though.'

Hannibal's eyes flashed, and suddenly his body was crashing against Will's, pinning him down, making the granite edge dig painfully into his back, and his grip on Will's chin turned to steel.

'Will-'

*'Matthew.'*

Because Will could see the same ill-restrained hunger from days ago, when Hannibal had fixed his collar, and this time, in morbid curiosity, he didn't want to stop pushing.

He wanted it to *break*.

It did.

There was a growl, a low sound he heard rumbled against his own chest, and then Hannibal was kissing him, insistent, aggressive, hot lips against his and a strength that forced him to lean back, to bend uncomfortably over the counter - muscle flattened against him, Hannibal's free hand coming to grip his hip in a hold that *bruised* while his other tangled in his hair, tingling in his scalp, maneuvering his head so he could deepen the kiss and slip his tongue into Will's mouth.

It was fucking *filthy*; it was like when Hannibal had kissed him that first night, after he'd forced Will to lap his fingers clean - starving, and inelegant, and *searching*. And, just like in that night, Will felt trapped; except before his limbs had been tied, and now it was muscle and stone, not silk, keeping him in place.

'Hannibal-'

'Shh, Will, you don't get to talk now.'

The words were hushed against his ear, a thigh was fit snug between Will's legs, rocking slowly, providing friction to Will's cock. It felt good, dizzying through the layers of expensive fabric, and Will could feel himself start to harden.

Hard, in Hannibal's arms, with a crowd chatting in tipsy shrieks and laughs a few meters away.

He tried to move to the side, but he was too compacted between Hannibal's chest and the island, and he couldn't slide even an inch. Still, for his attempt, he got a harsh bite on his bottom lip, and an almost painful pressure against his crotch that made him choke on a groan.

'Fuck, Han-'

'Quiet down, love,' and Hannibal was using his grip on Will's hair to force his head down, to the crook of his neck, so that each moan was muffled on his skin, 'We don't want to get interrupted, do we?'

Unable to speak, given that his lips were pressed tight against the dip of Hannibal's shoulder, Will was limited to shaking his head as much as Hannibal's hand on his hair allowed him to, trying to show the urgency of the situation in that way - because he *really* didn't want to get interrupted, no, he'd *die* if that happened, if someone went searching for them, or crossed them in their way to the bathroom, and saw living proof of everyone's preconceived ideas of them: that Will was Hannibal's kept boy, meant to look pretty and to stay still as he was fucked against the counter. No, he wouldn't be able to handle it, and it didn't even seem

unlikely to happen - the guests were nosy, uninhibited by alcohol, and they'd been gone for a little while already.

They were going to get caught. They were going to be *seen* and Hannibal wasn't stopping, wasn't relenting, and Will's cock was now fully hard and it *hurt*, the way it strained against the confines of his slacks, the continuous thrusting of Hannibal's thigh against him, and he felt like fucking *crying*.

He settled for trying to detach himself from Hannibal's neck instead, and trying to get the man to listen to him:

'Please, they'll-'

'I said no talking, Will,' Hannibal scolded, pushing Will's face against his shoulder, holding him there with his fingers splayed in his head, so that Will could do nothing but breathe in the scent of his clothes and try to shy away from the tortuous grinding, 'You don't deserve to speak, darling; not if you mean to tease me each time you open your mouth. You'll stay here now and take what I give you, won't you? You'll let me do as I please, you'll learn that I know best, because I own you, my love. You don't get this from anyone else. I won't allow it, do you understand?'

Will tried to lift his head to speak once more, but Hannibal's grip was unforgiving.

'Nod your head, sweetheart, show me you understand.'

Helpless, Will did as he was told. Hannibal rewarded him with a pleased hum and a kiss to his curls - but the rhythm he'd set for his thigh didn't slow, steady and persistent, and Will was going to come if he kept it going, and he heard a clash from the other side of the wall, a chair or a plate or *something* and someone was going to find them, it was fucking inevitable, and they'd see him close to tears and thrashing against Hannibal's impassive demeanour, and what if that was the moment he came? With someone else's eyes on him, watching as Hannibal made him come in his pants like some eager, inexperienced teen?

He could barely breathe, and his mind was short-circuiting, and Hannibal needed to give him more space before he combusted in that square inch between his scorching body and the sharp edge of the counter, and he was going to come, he couldn't help it, and Hannibal had to fucking *stop*, so Will pressed his legs together as tight as he could, muffling a broken sound against Hannibal's neck as pain burst through his injured leg - but he didn't relax, forcing the atrophied muscle to contract.

It didn't quite still Hannibal's leg, but it broke the rhythm, slowed it for a moment, and it gave Will a moment to breathe.

He felt his orgasm web again, and he sighed in relief just a second before Hannibal's fingers twisted in his hair and forced his head back so their eyes could meet.

Hannibal was an overwhelming mix of aroused, angry, and condescendingly amused. He searched Will's face, which Will was sure looked like a fucking mess, and his pupils blew impossibly wide.

'Legs, Will.'

Will shook his head, his gaze unfocused, wild, 'Hannibal, there's *people*.'

Hannibal quirked one brow, a smirk appearing on his lips. He slid his hand from Will's hair to his jawline, holding it there so Will had something to lean against in his frenzied state, and ran the pad of his thumb over Will's swollen bottom lip.

'Does that bother you, sweetheart?'

'Doesn't it bother *you*?' Will managed through haggard breaths - and his legs were shaking, about to relent, but he was still so *close*, and he couldn't handle Hannibal's thrusting again.

'No one will see, Will. If you're a good boy and come when I say, no one will know.'

He made it sound *reasonable* - in that sickly sweet, patronizing tone, all fond and tender and undeniably wanton, he made everything seem decent and proper, like it would all be fine if Will simply did as he said, like coming right there, in his pants, riding Hannibal's thigh as he muffled pathetic whines into his skin, was truly an *option*.

But it wasn't. It wasn't because even if by some miracle no one saw, they'd all know as soon as he turned the corner. Who could see him in that state, with his cheeks red and his eyes glazed, hair dishevelled and a fucking *stain* in the front of his pants, and not picture in perfect detail what had happened?

Except they'd probably twist the story: Franzo, Carlos, all those people who looked at him with the same amusedly superior look one gives a toy, they wouldn't guess that Hannibal had coerced pleasure out of *him*. No, because who would? It seemed much more plausible that Hannibal had fucked him over the counter, or that Will had kneeled down to suck his cock, and that he'd come, untouched, as some sort of unexpected, irrelevant consequence.

Will wouldn't dare give them the satisfaction. Not even if that meant denying himself.

So he looked at Hannibal, clenched his teeth and, even though he hated it, being so *vulnerable*, he let his despair wash over his expression.

'Please. I don't want anyone to see.'

The result was immediate. Hannibal's eyes widened, then went tight with worry, and his lips slackened in pure *awe*, like Will's distress - or perhaps Will begging him for help - was some divine sight.

'Oh, Will, sweetheart, it's alright. I'll take care of it,' he kissed Will's cheek, then pushed his thigh further against Will's crotch as he straightened, eliciting a broken moan from him, 'I know it aches, love, just hold on a moment longer.'

Will expected him to step away. He expected the hushed tones to continue, and for Hannibal to finally give him some space so he could fucking *breathe* and pull himself together.

That's what he'd *asked* for. He'd fucking said *please*.

Instead, Hannibal's arms curled around his back, pressing him impossibly closer into his chest, and his voice raised - it fucking *raised* -, ringing in Will's ears, freezing his blood:

'June, dear, would you come to the kitchen, please? I'm afraid we need some help.'

Will felt, in that moment, like his heart had completely stopped beating - and he fisted his hands in Hannibal's shirt, trying to push him away, to sink nails into the skin beneath, but Hannibal was unmoving.

'Hannibal, what the *fuck*-'

'Shh, it's alright,' Hannibal cooed, and he brought his hand to Will's head again, coaxing it to his chest, 'Like this, my darling boy, yes? Just like this, so she can't see.'

'Hannibal-'

'Lloyd now, dear,' Hannibal nipped playfully at his ear, like everything was *fine*, like he hadn't just invited someone to *see*, 'Or anything else you want to call me,' he purred, and his thigh moved again against Will's desperate erection, this time with intent.

And if he thought Will was going to call him *that*, if he thought Will would choose now to indulge his perverse fantasies, he was a fucking lunatic.

'Fucking *asshole*.'

Hannibal only chuckled, 'You'd truly look so pretty gagged.'

Will was blushing, and trying to find some retort to cover the fact, and trying to fucking *push* out of Hannibal's grip so he could slide behind the island counter and hide his erection before June got there, but then he heard steps approaching, and a voice:

'Heavens, what have you concocted for dessert that is taking- oh! Oh, dear me.'

Will could *feel* her eyes on him, taking in the way he held desperately onto Hannibal, bent and trembling against the counter as Hannibal stood all pleasant and composed; the way his head buried in his chest, and Hannibal petted his curls and ran soothing circles in his back; the way his thigh was still so obviously fit between Will's legs.

He was mortified. And he couldn't even gather the dignity to look her in the eye. Couldn't bring himself to do anything except hide his face in Hannibal's shirt and let the man pull him even closer.

'I apologize for the inconvenience, but my lovely Matthew here needed to be taken care of,' Hannibal said, entirely nonchalant, like the situation was normal.

There was a pause, the sound of a slow step forward, and Will tensed.

'I'd certainly not complain - not a bit, oh, I wouldn't - but I doubt I'm being invited to join,' came June's answer, trying for hushed and ending up high-pitched, surprised and hysterical and just a little bit aroused.

Will had never been more embarrassed. Never, *never* in the entire world could he ever face that woman in his life again.

'No, that's not the help we require,' Hannibal's chuckle was just a bit forced, the cool sort of politeness, 'You see, Matthew's quite shy, and he's afraid someone might see him. Someone less… comprehensive than you.'

'Oh,' June's laugh was genuine now, if a bit disappointed, 'Oh, wonderful, wonderful, yes, I'll tell them they shouldn't disturb you, then - I'll say you're preparing a surprise. Yes, yes, you two take the time you need. Oh, and Matthew, my dear, it's nothing to be ashamed about. Everyone has needs.'

Will was going to *die* with that comment.

'Thank you, June, we certainly appreciate it. Would you like to thank June, sweetheart?'

And his tone was mischievous, and he'd done it to *tease*, and Will couldn't even be bothered to rise to the fucking challenge, so he simply shook his head.

'Yes, wonderful, I'll go, then. Have fun, my dears,' June sounded amused as well, like everyone thought this situation was a joke except for Will.

She left. Will heard her steps retreat, heard the chatter on the other side of the wall grow louder as she returned.

Felt, immediately after, Hannibal's thigh pick up its rhythm again.

'Fuck- fuck you,' he stuttered through the sudden stimulation, finally lifting his head to glare at him.

He regretted it instantly. Something in his face - the deep flush he could feel burning under his skin, probably - made Hannibal *preen*.

'It's alright,' he cooed, all unsuppressed amusement, 'No one will bother us now, my sweet boy, wasn't that what you wanted?'

'*No,* Hannibal, I fucking-' but Hannibal was thrusting so purposefully, pressing so much it almost hurt, and he could barely think, let along string his thoughts into sentences.

'You must be aching so much, Will. Just let yourself relax for me, yes?'

I *can't.*'

'Oh, I don't think that's true,' Will could see, though his vision had begun to blur, a smirk twisting Hannibal's lips. The man pressed one hand to Will's erection, cupping it with only the slightest of pressures. 'You feel about to burst, sweetheart. We're alone now, my shy little boy, you can let go just for me. I know you want to, you look so pretty, so beautiful like this, so close to the edge.'

Hannibal's words felt so enticing, so simple when murmured into his ear, and Will bucked desperately into his hand, only for Hannibal to replace it with his thigh again.

'No, just like this, on my leg, sweetheart.'

The smile the man drew was sadistic, and it was fucking *humiliating* - he couldn't come like this, in his pants, just from humping Hannibal's leg. It felt so easy, so *inevitable,* but he couldn't do it.

'I can't- *no,* Hannibal.'

'Yes, you can. You will. Right now, Will, come on.'

Will's orgasm was just under the surface, creeping unrelentingly near with each thrust of Hannibal's thigh, and he could do little else than pant, and scratch at Hannibal's shoulders, and try to hold back tears.

'Fuck, no, *stop*.'

'Do you really not want to come? Do you want to stop?' Hannibal asked, tone low, wanton against his ear, a vicious thrust up to punctuate his words.

And Will *wanted* to come, wanted it more than anything, but he couldn't fucking imagine how embarrassing it would be - so, clinging to that shred of dignity, he pushed his climax away, and managed:

'I want- wanna stop.'

'Say please, then.'

The friction was so sweet, and Hannibal was sucking a wicked bruise into his neck, and it all felt so *good*, and nothing made sense - was he begging *not* to come? How fucking pathetic was that?

'Please, Hannibal.'

He could feel Hannibal laugh against his neck, a subtle sensation in the midst of a whirlwind of pleasure.

'You can do better, sweetheart.'

'Please, *please*, I can't- fuck, I need to-'

'What are you asking for, Will? You need to come, don't you? You want to come, baby boy?'

So many *words*, so many thoughts, and Will could barely fucking remember his name - and where even were they? - and what did he care besides this dam about to break inside him, this wave about to crash, this honey-sweet voice promising so many heavenly things?

'I want to come, *please*, Hannibal.'

And Hannibal was growling low against his neck, and his thigh was so perfect against Will's weeping dick, and he finally, *finally* let go, and he was coming.

Except he wasn't.

He swore he was - for a moment, for one fucking moment, he tipped over the edge -, but he wasn't, because he *didn't,* because Hannibal had taken his fucking thigh away.

And Will's legs buckled, and Hannibal's arms laced around his waist to keep him upright, and his dick twitched in his underwear, so desperate it *hurt*, and it was so fucking pathetic that after everything this was why Will was going to cry.

'Sshhh, Will, my love, it's alright. You did so well, just breathe, darling,' Hannibal was cooing against his ear, pressing kisses to his forehead, as if he hadn't been the one to drive Will to the edge, to make him fall, to pull him *out*.

'What the-' Will tried to chase some contact, tried to rut against anything, but Hannibal stilled his hips with one hand.

'No, little one, no. You don't get to.'

'You fucking *lied*!' Will's voice came out broken, and he wanted to *scream*, and he choked on a sob as he tried to hold back frustrated tears.

'Did you forget why I called you here, dear?' Hannibal whispered, all fond despite his words, 'This was supposed to be punishment.'

'But you-' Will struggled to think, to keep his head high and look at Hannibal, to pretend, even though he was crying, and rutting against empty air, and barely able to stand, that he had any inch of pride left, '- you called June, you fucking *called* her, you said-'

'I know, sweetheart. I was tempted to let you. You look so ravishing when you're overcome by pleasure,' he sounded almost *sad*, swiping the stray tears that were sliding down Will's flaming cheeks, gently kissing the corner of his left eye. And then, like it was effortless, like nothing had happened, he detached himself from Will, straightening his clothes, looking at him kindly, 'I'll plate the dessert while you calm down.'

It was almost impossible to believe that he was in real life. Preposterous, that they'd transitioned so unforgivingly between situations - that Hannibal was set to work, even though his slacks were obscenely tented, that Will was supposed to calm down, when he was trembling and blurry-sighted and quick-breathed, when his own erection was pulsing neglected between his legs.

He barely thought of anything as he watched Hannibal take the plates out of the fridge and set them on the counter. As he added flourishes and elements and finished each one with a swipe of a washcloth round the brim, Hannibal's erection deflated, and he slowly returned to his usual image of composure.

Will, on the other hand, was still struggling to breathe.

'Are you better, dear?' Hannibal asked once the dishes were ready to be served.

'What do you fucking think?' he snapped, wiping the moisture off his face. He couldn't fucking believed he'd *cried*.

He bet Hannibal had loved it.

Hannibal went around the counter to face Will, inspecting him with an obviously amused gaze.

'Give it some time, it will surely subside.'

*'Hannibal,'* Will could hear the note of whining on his tone, but he didn't care, as long as Hannibal *listened*, 'I can't go back out there.'

'Of course you can,' Hannibal smiled, stepping closer to place his hands on Will's hips - and there was nothing encouraging in his expression, only teasing.

'You said no one got to see me like this but you, what the fuck changed?' because Hannibal wouldn't listen to reason, but he'd always been driven by possessiveness.

Still, Hannibal's eyes were unperturbed; they darkened, in fact, to something akin to the hunger of before.

'How could it bother me, when they'll all know just why you're like this?'

And he smirked, and Will remembered that moment, before the meal, where Hannibal had kissed him so sweetly in front of everyone, and Will had thought that was the most petty he'd be.

Remembered something else, too.

Linette.

'Let me switch seats,' he asked, trying to step closer to Hannibal, only for the man to press his hips against the counter with a smirk.

'I seem to recall you being very invested in that seat.'

It'd been ridiculous, really, to think he'd ever be better than Hannibal at revenge.

'Hannibal, *please*.'

He only got a hum in response, and then Hannibal was leaning in to chastely kiss his cheek, to press his lips to the shell of his ear:

'Do you know how pretty you looked, my dear? How gorgeous, writhing for me, fighting your own pleasure. How perfect when I denied you, so needy and pink, crying from how much you wanted my touch. Do you know how much it cost me to pull away? How much I'd love to give you what you crave?'

And he let his fingers dance ghost-light over Will's erection, the gentlest of touches, before stepping away again, a smug smile on his face.

'I will bring the dishes out, now. You come out when you're ready, alright?'

Dazed, looking at the ground in a stubborn attempt to hide his blush, Will only nodded.

'Oh, and Will, you will not come before you return to the table. If you find yourself unable to resist the urge to bring yourself to orgasm before the party ends, you will first find me and ask *nicely*. Do you understand?'

Another nod. Will really didn't think he'd ever speak again.

'Good boy,' Hannibal praised, and then he was picking up two plates and walking out, just as if nothing had happened, back to the party.

Will could hear the chatter grow louder on the other side of the wall. Probably wondering why they'd taken so long - and Hannibal would lie, all innocent eyes and white shark teeth, and no one would know.

Will sighed, standing alone in the kitchen, and fussed with his shirt to try and calm down. Creased it again, the pretty blue fabric, in a fit of rage.

He wanted to rip it to shreds.

Chapter End Notes

The real question is: who's best, Linette or June?

Hope you guys enjoyed, see you in the next one~ <3

Oh, and shit's gonna happen next chapter. I mean, we wouldn't be talking about Will Graham if he didn't try to escape at least ONCE during this thing, would we? ;)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!